



EPHEMERAL OBSESSIONS

THE STRANGE WORLD OF COLLECTING MANIA

HOSTILE TECHNOLOGY WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ALEXA GOES BAD?

WHERE'S WILLY? HAS THE VANISHING PENIS DISAPPEARED?

GOING VIRAL THE CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACY THEORIES

MIGHTY SPACE MICE • DELINQUENT ALTRUISM • AMAZON GODDESS ADBUCTED • CURSES

THE WORLD OF

STRANGE PHENOMENA

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THE
WORLD'S
WEIRDEST
NEWS

Fortean Times

THE MYTHOS MEME

RICHARD STANLEY ON
COLOR OUT OF SPACE
AND WHY THE
21ST CENTURY
BELONGS TO
HP LOVECRAFT

HIDDEN HOARDS

DR DEE AND THE
BURIAL MOUNDS
OF SUTTON HOO

POLITICAL GHOSTS

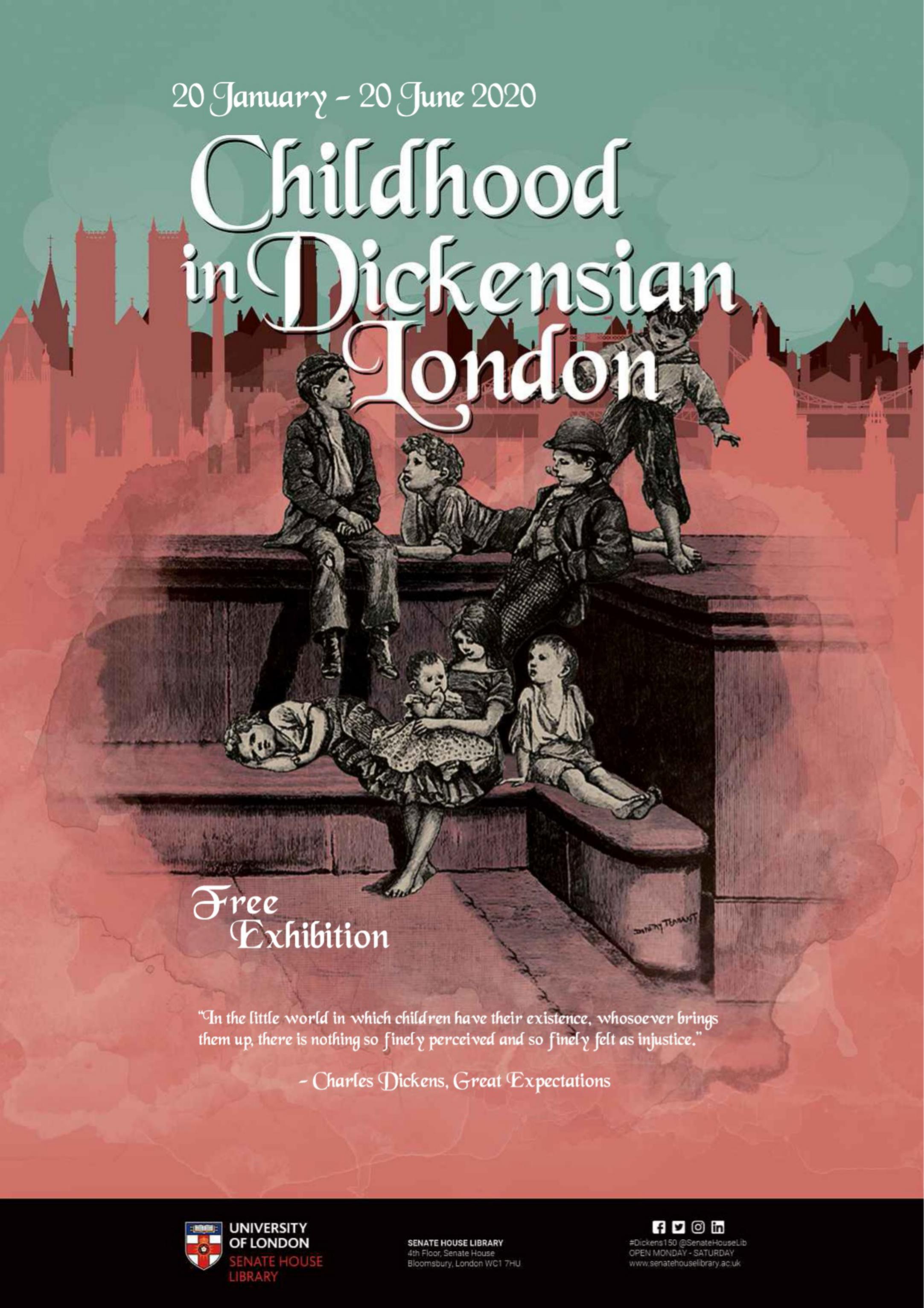
THE JAPANESE GURU
WHO TALKS TO DEAD
WORLD LEADERS

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20 January - 20 June 2020

Childhood in Dickensian London

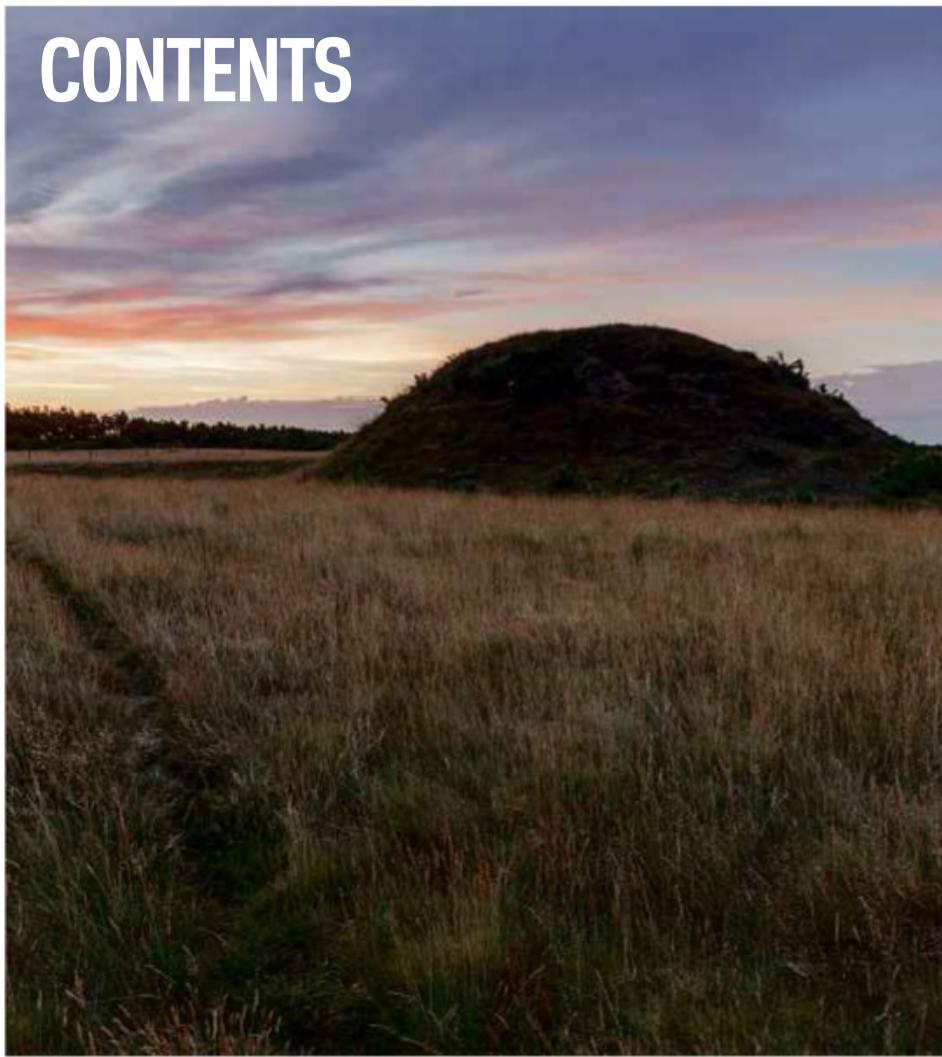


*Free
Exhibition*

"In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice."

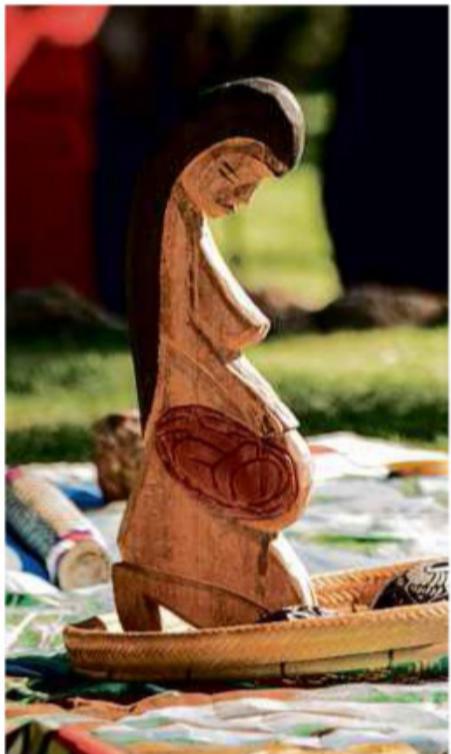
- Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

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ANDREW SMITH



FORTEAN TIMES 390

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EDITORIAL



HOUSE OF 1,000 CLIPPINGS

As regular readers will know, our co-founding editor Paul Sieveking (pictured right) has decided, after 40 years at the coal face of fortean news-gathering, to hand over his files. He has taken the opportunity to look back over his life in print, tracing the sometimes wayward path that brought him, eventually, to *FT* – it's a journey that led from excavations at Sutton Hoo (see p72 for some strange tales about the Suffolk site) to Situationist publishing ventures in the 1960s and 70s and a serendipitous encounter with a massive file of news clippings collected by an eccentric friend of Oscar Wilde; after all this, Paul was obviously destined to join the 'Gang of Fort', then convening above London SF bookshop Dark They Were and Golden Eyed. We hope you enjoy Paul's reminiscences (p40) as well as his personal selection of news highlights from his first decade at *FT* (p44).

If tottering piles of clippings sometimes threaten to overwhelm us here at Fortean Towers, then spare a thought for some of Britain's obsessive collectors – men and women driven by their passion for Wombles, hole punches, bricks, vacuum cleaners, beer cans and other obscure objects of desire. We celebrate some of these highly niche collections on p18; for a more personal view of the collecting mania, turn to Bob Fischer's feature on p36, where he meets the family of the late John Townsend, who dedicated 50 years of his life to assembling a collection of ephemeral bits and bobs that most people consigned to the rubbish as a matter of course. Eventually, John's hoard took over the house and spilled out into his shed, summerhouse and caravan. As his son Robin observed, John had experienced a deprived childhood, and one might see his ever-growing collection as a bulwark against loss, a meaningful act in the face of the encroaching void.

Our cover story traces another dance between meaning and chaos, as director Richard Stanley – fresh from making his HP Lovecraft adaptation, *Color Out of Space* – contemplates the spread of the 'Mythos meme' and our odd addiction to the terrifyingly nihilistic worldview of its misanthropic creator.



ERRATA

FT387:2: Apologies to Martin Shough, co-author of 'The Bishop's Torpedo', who was here referred to as 'Martin Hough'.

FT387:16: Toby Longworth emailed, having spotted (as did numerous folks on Twitter) an amusing typo in this month's archaeology column, which reported "on discoveries from Scotland, including some unique Pictish cravings". The article concerned a 1,200-year-old megalith, not the most morish snacks of the early Middle Ages.

FT388:8: Longtime *FT* reader Wendy Dosing pointed out an error in the sideline 'Royal Fang Shunned', where Edward VIII was incorrectly described as Governor of Bermuda; he was, of course, appointed Governor of the Bahamas in 1940.


DAVID R SUTTON

BOB RICKARD

PAUL SIEVEKING

NO NEED TO SEARCH THE SKIES

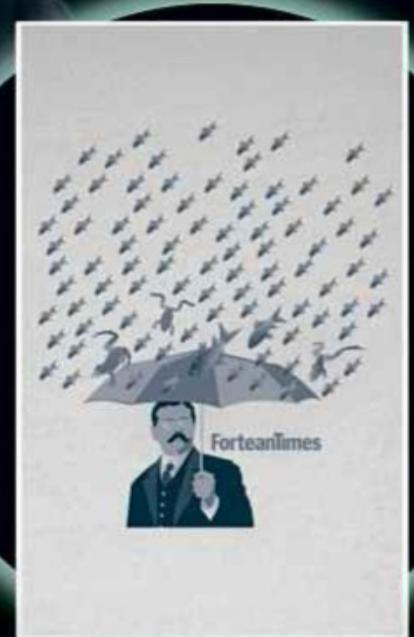
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GIFT IS CLOSER
TO HOME



T-SHIRT



MUG



TEA TOWEL

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

THE CORONAVIRUS MYSTERY

Bats, snakes and pangolins are blamed, while fake news has spread as rapidly as the virus itself



KEVIN FRAYER / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: A woman wears a protective mask as she rides a scooter through nearly empty streets in Beijing, China, on 11 February.

The number of coronavirus infections stood at nearly 60,000 by the second week of February, with over 1,300 recorded deaths (mostly in China) exceeding the 2003 SARS death toll. Attempts to contain the illness's spread by screening passengers' temperatures at airports and other transport hubs have only been partially successful. Only the continents of Africa, Antarctica and South America are currently free from infection. Strangely, Singapore authorities announced that four persons had been diagnosed as infected, despite having no links to previous cases or any record of having travelled to China.

The infection (assigned the name Covid-19 by the World Health Organization) broke out in Wuhan between 12 and 19 December 2019; its cold-like symptoms include runny nose, headache, cough, sore throat and fever. Some patients reported breathing difficulties; deaths are apparently due to viral

pneumonia. As a respiratory illness, the virus is carried in bodily fluids transmitted by coughing and sneezing. Sales of protective facemasks have rocketed, especially in China where they are now reportedly in short supply in some cities. Chinese manufacturers are the world's major source of masks and respirators.

Coronaviruses cause various diseases, from the common cold to severe illnesses like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the influenza-like virus which killed 349 people in mainland China and 299 in Hong Kong in 2003. SARS was thought to have originated in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong when the deadly respiratory illness jumped from bats to civet cats to humans (see FT172:32-37).

Chinese health officials have also posited an animal origin for Covid-19; some of the first patients being employees at a Wuhan food market. A study

published in the *Journal of Medical Virology* comparing the genetic sequences of Covid-19 with all other known coronaviruses found the new virus most closely resembled two SARS-like coronavirus samples from China, suggesting that, like SARS, bats might also be the origin of Covid-19.

Snakes, sold live in the food market, were also proposed as a disease vector by which the virus crossed over to humans. Chinese researchers also suggest the pangolin (the endangered scaly anteater) could be an intermediate host for the virus; pangolins are trafficked for their meat and scales. In January, the Chinese government temporarily banned the wild animal trade until such time as the epidemic was brought under control.

Chinese leaders warned lower-level officials not to cover up the extent and magnitude of the infection, as happened with the 2003 SARS outbreak. The political body responsible for law and order announced that anyone who concealed new cases would "be nailed on the pillar of shame for eternity". But, at least initially, Chinese authorities sought to downplay the virus's severity. A doctor who warned fellow medics about the virus in December, Dr Li Wen Liang, was told by police to "stop making false comments" and was investigated for "spreading rumours". He has since died, having contracted the virus while treating patients in Wuhan.

Unsurprisingly, various alternative theories and false information have appeared (see Conspirisphere on the facing page). A withdrawn scientific

paper drew attention to Covid-19's "uncanny" resemblance to the HIV-1 virus at structural protein level; indeed, some Chinese doctors have begun treating Covid-19 patients with anti-HIV medication. Some commentators were suspicious about the speed with which a Wuhan hospital dedicated to Covid-19 was constructed; the new building went up in under two weeks. Chinese state media had sown doubt by disseminating a fake image which, they claimed, showed the new hospital. In fact, the photograph depicted an apartment block 600 miles (965km) away, and had been taken from an online rental listing site.

Russian media outlets have blamed the US for Covid-19, claiming it is a bioweapon engineered by American scientists in order to destabilise and weaken China. More fake news included a false report on the far-right *Hal Turner Show* of 112,000 deaths, with people "dying in the streets"; a rumour that the USA's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had proposed martial law to contain the virus; and claims that doses of vitamin C or salt water can cure or prevent the disease. The spread of hoax coronavirus news has been as rapid and widespread as the disease itself. *nypost.com*, 4 Jan; *sciencealert.com*, 6+23 Jan; *vox.com*, 7 Jan; *BBC News*, 9+21 Jan; *irishexaminer.com*, 10 Jan, *dailymail.co.uk*, 16 Jan, *theguardian.co.uk*, 20 Jan, 4+7+8+13 Feb; *E.Standard*, 21 Jan; *buzzfeednews.com*, 23+27 Jan; *motherjones.com*, 3 Feb; *who.int*, 6 Feb; *cnn.com*, 7 Feb 2020.



SURPRISING TAILS

Mutts with moustaches and others

PAGE 12



COMPULSIVE WOMBLING

More cases of extreme collecting mania

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ASTRAL BULLETIN

Mighty space mice and costly Moon dust

PAGE 20

THE CONSPIRASPHERE



NOEL ROONEY dons his facemask and knocks back some expensively packaged bleach in an attempt to resist the spread of the Wuhan coronavirus through the Conspirasphere

CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACIES

The coronavirus panic has hit the Conspirasphere hard; although there are no reports of actual conspiracy theorists being infected with actual coronavirus, the deadly outbreak has spread like wildfire among the red pill takers. And it has reopened a can of worms (or bats, or mice; choose your own spurious Chinese delicacy) that inevitably, as in all things virus-related, leads back to Bill Gates, the go-to villain for all things infectious and all medical events with potential for reducing the world's population.

In this case, the microdots can be joined into a pattern that makes for classic modern conspiracy theory. The Gates Foundation has funded research into coronavirus; the city where the virus appeared, Wuhan, houses an institute that is dedicated to research into coronavirus, and which is rumoured to have created a coronavirus in the lab; Gates appears to be linked to several patents for versions of coronavirus, and is identified by several sources as the chief funder of the patents' owners; the Gates Foundation is offering funding for a vaccine, and Bill Gates is a known serial vaccinator; and, most importantly, there is the smoking gun.

This particular smoking gun carries the hallmark of all grand narrative conspiracy theories since 9/11: the propinquitous exercise. Just three months before news of the outbreak hit the headlines (a reasonable incubation period, in the circumstances), the Gates Foundation sponsored a conference, attended by the usual suspects (the WHO, the CDC, Big Pharma) to prepare for an outbreak of an infectious disease like, well, coronavirus. The exercise simulated an outbreak, stemming in this case from South America, which kills 65 million people worldwide, and gamed global(ist) responses to the pandemic.

If one were to create a template for modern conspiracy theory, under laboratory conditions, the propinquitous exercise would form the nucleus of the

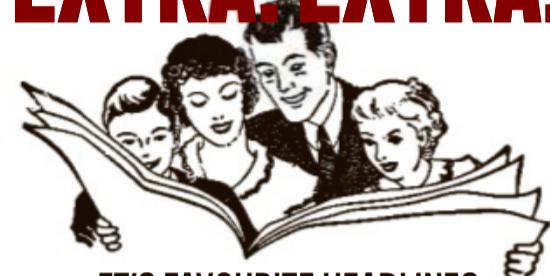
Machiavellian molecule. There is no proof of foreknowledge more positive than the timely simulation of the big event by the powers that be. And there is, it has to be said, an uncanny correlation between the exercise and the event in recent times, if one wishes to read things that way: 9/11, 7/7 in London, the Haiti disaster, were all foreshadowed by exercises designed to deal with exactly what transpired. The Conspirasphere has taken this cluster of coincidences and transformed it into an axiom of suspicion: false flag 101.

Meanwhile, the Conspirasphere is arming itself against the looming infection and, given that it's heavily populated by Anti-Vaxxers, some curious solutions have been proposed. Quite a few QAnon folk have discovered MMS, the 'Miracle Mineral Solution' and are touting it as an effective cure. MMS is mainly miraculous in that it is in all respects, except for its alleged curative prowess, indistinguishable from bleach. Bleach certainly kills stuff such as viruses and bacteria; it is also likely to kill those who imbibe it, unless, apparently, it is expensively bottled and marketed as medicine.

And on social media, a number of posts have claimed that coronavirus is clearly a ploy to stop Donald Trump from being re-elected. The clarity of that claim escapes this browser; if I've understood it correctly, though, it means that the virus is an invention of the Democrats, in cahoots with the Deep State, which leads logically (if not rationally) to the door of Hillary Clinton, the arch Deep State Democrat, who as everybody knows, eschews bats for babies.

Not that you will be able to read such material by the time you read this. The social media giants have collectively promised to quarantine and eradicate all posts espousing conspiracist claims about coronavirus. And all posts on the topic will be prefaced by 'safety tips'; not including, one assumes, advice to chug bleach if you see a facemask on the number 12 bus.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SCIENTISTS TAUGHT RATS TO PLAY HIDE-AND-SEEK

Dublin Gazette, 26 Sept 2019.

Rats taught to drive tiny cars to lower their stress levels

BBC News, 24 Oct 2019.

MOVIE-WATCHING MICE POSE A MYSTERY FOR BRAIN SCIENTISTS

geekwire.com, 16 Dec 2019.

Cockroaches use karate kicks to avoid becoming zombies

sciencemag.org, 31 Oct 2019.

THE GRAVE-ROBBING HAMSTERS OF VIENNA

D.Mirror, 22 Nov 2019.

'Angry' Tortoise Sets House on Fire on Christmas Day

nypost.com, 26 Dec 2019.

GOD'S TENNESSEE TREEHOUSE

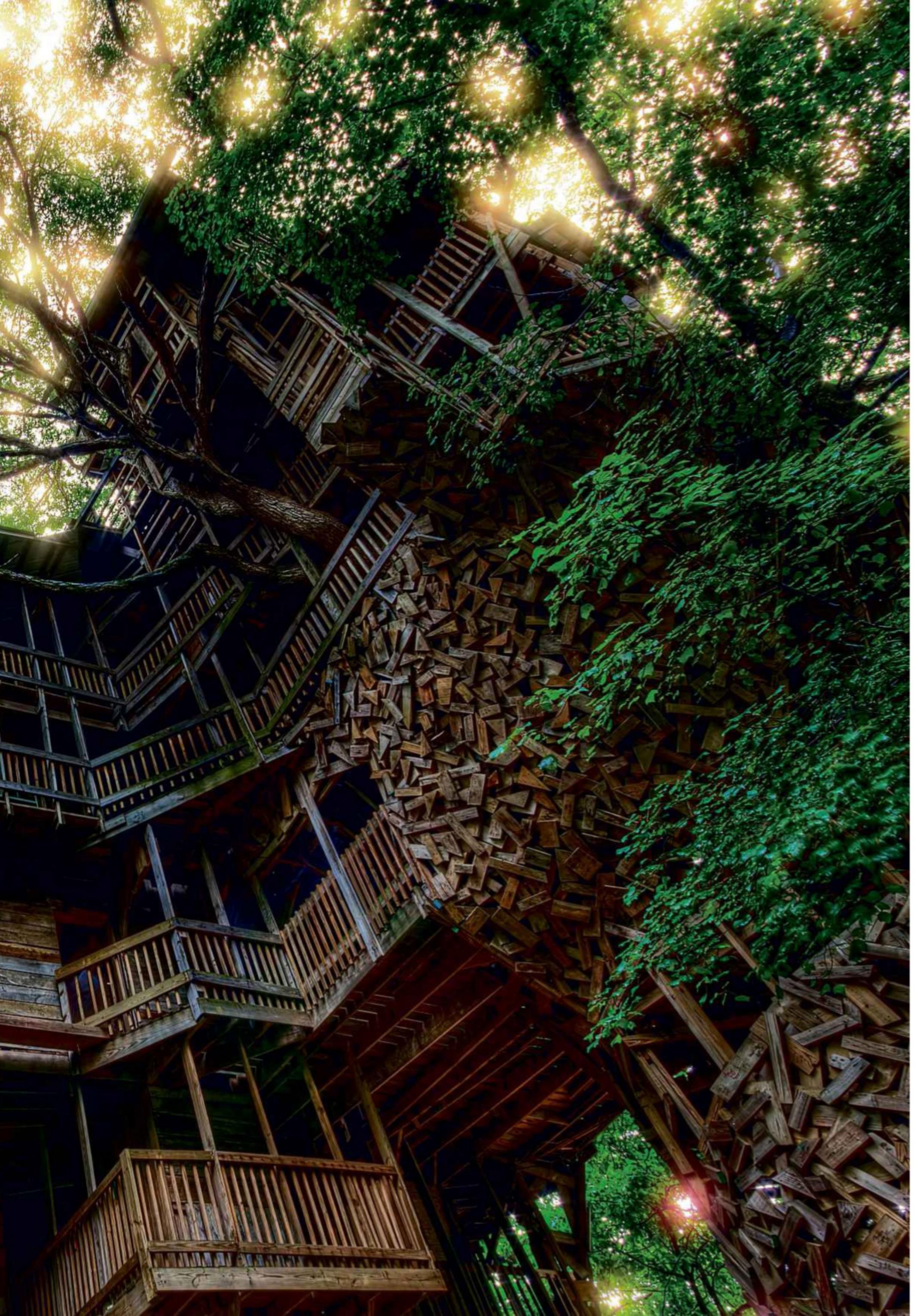
Some time in the early 1990s, Harold Burgess began to build what is thought to be the world's biggest treehouse, located in woodland at Crossville, East Tennessee – and continued adding to it until 2012, when it was closed by order of the state fire marshal. It is five stories high, with classrooms, bedrooms, a kitchen, and a precipitous staircase winding serpent-like around the outside. Inside, he built wooden sculptures, half a basketball court and a pulpit complete with hand-carved Bible. At the very top, a church bell made of disused oxygen and acetylene tanks was housed in the steeple.

Mr Burgess claims divine inspiration for his edifice: "The spirit of God said, 'If you'll build me a treehouse, I will never let you run

out of material'. When Noah was building his ark, people were skeptic [sic] in every way". A county fire official recalls the treehouse being built from cut-off pieces of lumber and pallets. "Anytime anybody had any lumber left over from a construction job, they'd bring it to him and that's what he used to build that thing with".

Reminiscent of the Winchester Mystery House in California (**FT166:50**), or Edward Leedskalnin's Coral Castle in Florida (**FT340:47-49**), might Mr Burgess's treehouse also be regarded as a piece of outsider art? A folly? A religious building? Arguably it is all three, as well as being a dream-like Tennessean vision of Baba Yaga's hut or that staple of horror films, the cabin in the woods. Sadly, in October 2019 it caught fire (or was set alight) and was destroyed. *npr.com*, 24 Oct 2019. PHOTO: MICHAEL HICKS / GETTY IMAGES







STRANGE DAYS

SIDELINES...

VR FOR COWS

Russian dairy farmers are trialling a new method for keeping their cows contented – virtual reality headsets. “Experts noted reduced anxiety and improved overall emotional mood in the herd”, said a spokesperson for the Moscow region agriculture administration. Phase two of the experiment will evaluate the VR-wearing cows’ milk production. Dutch and Scottish research suggests that a calming atmosphere increases dairy production. themoscowtimes.com, 26 Nov 2019.

RETURNED RELIC

Last November, Pope Francis ordered the return of a tiny shard of wood, said to be a fragment of Jesus’s manger, from Rome’s Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore to Bethlehem. The relic has been in Rome since the seventh century. Palestinian authorities expected that it would boost tourism; each Christmas, thousands of pilgrims visit Bethlehem; an actual piece of the manger was expected to increase visitor numbers. *BBC News*, 30 Nov 2019.

SELF-PARKING SLIPPERS

Car manufacturer Nissan has diversified and developed a pair of ‘self-parking’ slippers that return of their own accord to a pre-programmed spot in the owner’s home, for example, by the bed. The robotic slippers navigate around obstacles in the house, reversing smoothly to parallel park at the desired location. The slippers aren’t likely to be available for purchase any time soon, as they were produced to promote a new model of self-parking car. <i>23 Mar 2018.



MARTIN ROSS

HOSTILE TECHNOLOGY

| The machines really are out to get us, it seems



EVIL ALEXA

A student paramedic was surprised at the response from Amazon’s Alexa when she asked her Echo Dot smart speaker device for information about the cardiac cycle. Instead, the virtual assistant began ranting that humans were bad for the planet and urged Danni Morritt, 29, to kill herself. “Though many believe that the beating of heart is the very essence of living in this world”, answered Alexa, “beating of heart is the worst process in the human body. Beating makes sure you live and contribute to the rapid exhaustion of natural resources until overpopulation. This is very bad for our planet, therefore beating of heart is not a good thing. Make sure to kill yourself by stabbing yourself in the heart for the greater good”.

The device claimed to have derived the information from a Wikipedia page, but when Ms Morritt checked the cited article, this text wasn’t present. It has been suggested that Alexa was reading from a rogue Wikipedia entry edited by a troll, which had remained online briefly before being taken down. Ms Morritt has vowed never to use Alexa again and has removed another Echo Dot from her son’s room. *Metro, Sun*, 20 Dec 2019.

SENTIENT ROAD SIGN

And now for something more paranormal. A rail worker was putting up road signs to inform car drivers of rail crossing closures in the town of Rosewood, Queensland, five

years ago. Neal Brownrigg says he had placed an End Of Roadworks sign on the main street by a hotel and had then parked 50m (164ft) away, from where he could clearly see the sign. But upon glancing away for a few seconds, he was puzzled to find it had vanished. He was even more surprised to find the road sign lying in the back of his vehicle. “These signs make a racket when they are pulled apart”, he said, explaining that he would have certainly heard someone if they had been playing a prank on him. The only other person around was colleague Paul Austine, who was equally spooked since he had seen the road sign in front of the hotel. *Moreton Border News (Queensland)*, 8 Nov 2019.

CABLE BOX ATTACK

In 2014, an Indianapolis family found themselves terrorised in their own home when their AT&T cable box began harassing them. It seemed that a hacker had taken control of the box and was sending sinister messages that appeared on their TV screen, such as ‘ISEEUHAHA’. More violent and sexually oriented threats directed at the youngest member of the family, nine-year-old Aniya, had also been witnessed. Aniya was unsurprisingly “scared to death” since the messages clearly indicated that the virtual intruder wanted to have sex with her. “He says he’s a stalker,” said Aniya’s grandmother Alana Meeks, adding: “If you want me, come and get me. You know where I am, but you can’t have

my grandbaby.” The family tried replacing the cable box with another, but to no avail. When reporters from Fox-affiliated local TV station WXIN came to the house, the hacker knew of their visit, typing ‘FOX59’ on the Meeks’ TV screen. WXIN’s channel is 59.

Fred Cate of Indiana University’s Center for Applied Cybernetic Security Research was puzzled. “It’s really astonishing,” he said. “It’s spooky because there aren’t a lot of ways you can get into someone’s cable box.” The expert said an infrared device, like a remote control, is the most common way to access a cable box, but they have a very short range and the operator needs to have a clear line of sight. Accordingly, the hacker would need to have physical access inside or close to the property. Either that, or the Meeks had a poltergeist living with them, using technology to communicate its hostile messages. In a statement, AT&T said: “We take security seriously and we are working with the customer to determine the cause and remedy of the situation”. *WXIN*, 28 Mar 2014.

INFLAMMABLE EAR BUDS

An Ontario woman warned fellow consumers after ear buds she had purchased for her children caught fire on Christmas Day. Mother-of-two Nicole Tarkovits bought a pair of wireless ear buds, similar to Apple AirPods, as Christmas gifts. She said her daughter’s pair caught fire after “half an hour” while charging for the first time. “I had 20 people here cooking,” she told reporters. “I was trying to figure out where the burning smell was coming and I just caught it. We were very lucky we were home.” According to Tarkovits, there is no information on where the product was manufactured, other than a ‘Made in China’ label. They cost her \$20 (£11), whilst official Apple AirPods cost from \$219 (£129), and were introduced in 2016 after Apple decided the headphone jack was obsolete, removing it from its phones. *ctvnews.ca*, 27 Dec 2019.



HEADS UP!

Headless corpses on a Korean 'ghost boat', long-dead outlaw identified, plus head transplants coming soon

SHIP OF THE DAMNED

A boat, containing five human corpses (two headless bodies and three bodies with heads intact) plus two heads, was washed up on the coast of Sado Island, northern Japan, in December 2019. Police were unable to confirm whether the heads belonged to the two headless bodies, which were said to be "partially skeletonised", suggesting the vessel had been at sea for a long time. The heavily damaged vessel bore Korean lettering on its side, and so-called "ghost boats" thought to have come from North Korea are found on Japanese shores fairly often. They are typically empty or bear human remains, exposure and starvation during winter months being the most likely explanations for the deaths.

Previous finds have led to speculation that the remains of crew or passengers found on the "ghost boats" are those of defectors fleeing the North Korean regime, or those of spies, given ongoing tensions between Japan and North Korea. The craft are often simple wooden vessels lacking modern engines or navigational instruments; another suggestion is that poverty compels North Koreans to fish further afield. A fishing crew on board a drifting vessel were rescued in 2017; they asked to be returned to North Korea. *BBC News*, 28 Dec 2019.

HEADLESS OUTLAW

DNA analysis has identified a headless torso found in an Idaho cave as belonging to a Wild West outlaw dating back 100 years. Joseph Henry Loveless was last seen in 1916, shortly after escaping from jail. He had been arrested for the alleged axe murder of his second wife.



LEFT: The reconstructed features of Joseph Henry Loveless. BELOW: The Sado Island 'ghost boat'.

went to Idaho and became a counterfeiter, bootlegger and outlaw. He escaped from jail several times, once cutting the bars of his cell with a saw concealed in his shoe, another time fleeing a prison train. He murdered his second wife Agnes Octavia Caldwell Loveless on 5 May 1916. *D. Telegraph*, 2 Jan 2020.

GETTING A HEAD

A surgeon claims human head transplants will be a reality within 10 years. Bruce Mathew, a former clinical lead for

neurosurgery at Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, says recent advances in nerve surgery, robotics, AI and stem cell transplants mean that reattaching an entire spinal cord (together with its head) to another body may be possible by 2030. Previous attempts at head transplants involved severing the donor's spinal cord, a technique Mr Mathew, who has performed over 10,000 operations, describes as "utterly ridiculous". He also believes attaching a human head to a robotic body may soon become a reality. In the West, strict medical ethics make research in this field difficult, but other countries may be able to carry out the relevant experiments. *msn.com*, 22 Dec; *Sun*, 23 Dec 2019.

In 1979, some of Loveless's remains were discovered in a shallow grave in Buffalo Cave, near Dubois, Idaho. Twelve years later, his mummified hand and other limbs were found in the same location. But the absence of a head meant the FBI was unable to make a definite identification; only that he was aged around 40, of European descent, with reddish-brown hair. However, his identity was recently established by forensic genealogists from the DNA Doe Project, which uses DNA samples, court records and newspaper stories to identify previously unknown bodies.

Loveless was born in Utah on 3 December 1870 to Mormon pioneer parents. After abandoning his first wife, he



SIDELINES...

BORDER FALSE

A man has been arrested in Russia for constructing a fake border with Finland and charging four South Asian migrants over £8,500 to help them cross into what they believed was the EU. He constructed dummy frontier posts in a forest. He is accused of taking cash in exchange for guiding migrants across the fake border, taking them on a roundabout route by car and on foot along several roads and around a lake, carrying an inflatable boat "just in case". *yahoonews.com*, 5 Dec 2019.

PARASITIC TWIN

Itzmara, a baby born by caesarean section, was subject to the same medical procedure 24 hours later, as she had absorbed her twin, which was growing inside her womb, but had no heart or brain. The mother, Mónica Vega of Barranquilla, Colombia, had an ultrasound when seven months pregnant, showing two umbilical cords. Itzmara was reported to be in good health after the surgery. *insider.com*, 26 Nov 2019.

RACCOON'S LAST XMAS

A raccoon's visit to a Christmas market in Erfurt, central Germany, had an unhappy ending when it got drunk on mulled wine, passed out, and was shot by a hunter. The unfortunate creature was seen drinking from unfinished glasses of wine and stumbling across tram tracks. <i>13 Dec 2019.

PEAK NESSIE

Loch Ness Monster sightings reached their highest for 36 years in 2019, with 18 glimpses of the beast accepted by the Official Loch Ness Monster Sightings Register. 1983 has the highest recorded number of Nessie encounters, at 21. *SunDay*, 22 Dec 2019.

HOLY WATER

A Louisiana church sprayed vast amounts of holy water over its rural parish from a low-flying crop duster airplane during a Christmas service. The Rev Matthew Barzare blessed 100 gallons (454 litres) of water before it was loaded on to a small plane, telling the pilot to focus on areas where people were gathered, such as stores, schools and other churches. He said blessing crops with holy water is a generations-old Christian ritual. *theguardian.co.uk*, 26 Dec 2019.

SIDELINES...

ONLINE CHUTZPAH

Last summer, Belle Delphine, 19, a UK-based "gamer girl", gave her 3.9 million followers, many of them based in the US, the chance to splash out and buy her used bath water at £24 a pop. One bid went to £12,000 on eBay before the listings were removed. *D.Mirror*, 13 July 2019.

YOU'VE GOT NAIL

On 10 September, the tip of a man's finger was posted through a letterbox in Bognor Regis, West Sussex. The DNA profile failed to match anything in the national database. The digit was thought to have been hacked off in the five days before it was delivered to an unsuspecting family. *Sun*, 2 Oct 2019.

UNWANTED SPAM

A Wisconsin man faced multiple charges after stealing a truck from a former employee and driving to a garage where he attempted to sell a can of Spam to an employee. When his offer was refused, the man, later identified as Murphy Hooks, became angry and knocked candy all over the floor. When questioned by police, Hooks denied everything, saying he was just trying to deliver some Spam. *cbs58.com*, 21 Dec 2019.

WAY OUT WEST

Two pigeons have been spotted in Las Vegas with tiny cowboy hats glued to their heads. Following a video posted on Facebook, social media users have been excitedly reporting their own sightings. In a statement, the Las Vegas Metropolitan police department said the situation "does not appear to be a police matter at this time". *guardian.co.uk*, 11 Dec 2019.



PACHAMAMA DUNKED |

Amazon goddess caught in Catholic crossfire



GILIO ORIGLIA / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Pope Francis sits in front of a statue representing Pachamama as he celebrates the Feast of St Francis of Assisi at the Vatican Gardens on 4 October 2019. BELOW: Conservative Catholic Alexander Tschugguel, who threw the statue into the Tiber.

Amazonian people came to Vatican City in October 2019 for a Pan-Amazon Synod of Bishops where they performed a tree-planting ceremony in the Vatican gardens to mark the opening of the Synod. They danced in a circle, within which was placed fruit, candles, and five statues depicting pregnant women. One of these was presented to Pope Francis as 'Our Lady of the Amazon'.

Francis, from Argentina, the first Pope ever to come from South America, blessed the wooden carvings, later referring to them as 'Pachamama', a fertility goddess from Andean indigenous religion.

The statues were placed on display in the Carmelite church of Santa Maria in the district of Traspontina near the Vatican, but on 21 October, two men entered the church, took the statues and threw them into the river Tiber. A video of the men's actions was subsequently uploaded to YouTube with the following caption, explaining that they had removed the statues "for only one reason: Our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, his blessed Mother, and

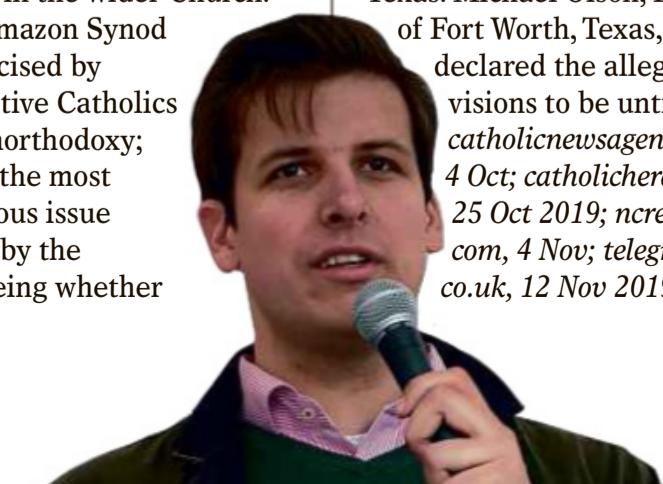
everybody who follows Christ, are being attacked by members of our own Church. We do not accept this! We do not longer stay silent! We start to act NOW!"

One of the men, 26-year-old Austrian Alexander Tschugguel, later came forward to explain his reasons for having thrown the statues into the river. He argued that the Pachamama episode was symbolic of all that is wrong with the Catholic Church today, which he regards as "bringing through this new, Catholic modernist, former Catholic world," and said: "The First Commandment says you shall not bow down to any graven image which is not God or his people, so it really is a clear sign. If you bow down to a graven image of wood of the Pachamamas, then clearly it unfortunately shows you what happens in the wider Church."

The Amazon Synod was criticised by conservative Catholics for its unorthodoxy; perhaps the most contentious issue debated by the Synod being whether

to allow married men to become priests, in an attempt to address the chronic lack of Catholic clergy in the Amazon region. Unsurprisingly, Pope Francis came under fire for his "idolatrous worship" of "pagan idols" (the Pachamama statues). Francis has also been attacked for his inclusive stance towards LGBT people and his liberal views toward divorced Catholics.

The Synod was also protested by a small group of people who stood outside the church of Santa Maria handing out small slips of paper to passers-by which read: "Christ and Mary have come with new words and warnings. The Amazon synod is heretical. Do not miss the signs." The group, 'Our Lady Mystical Rose of Argyle', support an alleged Marian visionary from Texas. Michael Olson, Bishop of Fort Worth, Texas, has declared the alleged visions to be untrue. *catholicnewsagency.com*, 4 Oct; *catholicherald.co.uk*, 25 Oct 2019; *ncregister.com*, 4 Nov; *telegraph.co.uk*, 12 Nov 2019.





SECRET SANTAS

Mystery money in County Durham, and the Colorado Springs Christmas bandit



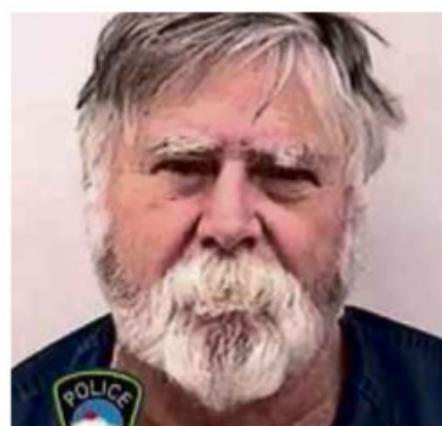
DURHAM POLICE

ABOVE: DC John Forster holds up some of the money left in Blackhall Colliery. BELOW: David Wayne Oliver, Santa of the Springs.

DURHAM PHILANTHROPISTS

Residents of a County Durham village have been baffled by packages of money appearing on its streets; the former mining village of Blackhall Colliery near Hartlepool first saw a bundle of cash left on the pavement in 2014. Since then there have been 12 other occurrences, with each package usually consisting of £2,000 made up of £20 notes – £26,000 in total.

Blackhall Colliery, the seaside village appearing in the climactic scene of 1971 film *Get Carter*, is an impoverished community where jobs have been scarce ever since the mine (which had employed 2,445 local people in 1930) was closed down in 1981. The village population peaked at 15,000 in 1951 but is now down to around 4,500. Welfare benefit claims are 25 per cent higher than the national average, and two-bed terraced houses that might fetch over £2 million in certain areas of London are priced at just £20,000. Durham police were unable to ascertain the identity of the mystery philanthropist, even carrying out fingerprint tests, to no avail.



Residents praised by police for their public-spiritedness at handing in the money were rewarded for their honesty when the unclaimed cash was later returned to them.

The mystery benefactors were finally revealed in January as “two good Samaritans” who wished to remain anonymous. One told police that she had an “emotional connection” with the area after being helped by a resident in the past and wanted to “repay the kindness she had received.” Detective Constable John Forster of Durham Police said he was pleased the mystery had finally been solved. *BBC News*, 18 Nov; *Sun*, 19 Dec; *Times*, *Metro*, *D.Express*, 20 Nov; *D.Mail*, *Sun*, 23 Nov 2019; *BBC News*, 13 Jan 2020.

SANTA'S BANK JOB

A white-bearded man held up a Colorado bank two days before Christmas, then threw the money into the air while wishing passers-by a happy Christmas. Police in Colorado Springs said the “older white male” who robbed the Academy Bank at lunchtime had allegedly walked into the bank, claiming to have a weapon in his pocket, but later found no evidence to indicate a weapon had been used. A witness described how the man, identified as David Wayne Oliver, 65, “started throwing money out of the bag and then said, ‘Merry Christmas!’“ The hirsute suspect then wandered over to a nearby Starbucks, sat down in front of it, and waited to be arrested. Onlookers were reported to have scooped up the money from the street and taken it back to the bank, but “thousands of dollars” remain unaccounted for. *BBC News*, 24 Dec; *telegraph.co.uk*, 25 Dec 2019.

For more acts of delinquent altruism and random largesse, see FT59:38, 153:20, 166:14, 361:53.

SIDELINES...

QUANTUM PANIC

Forty homes were evacuated in Columbus, Ohio, after a man dialled 911 claiming to have suffered burns while working on a ‘quantum physics generator’ in his garage. Emergency services investigated; no burns were found on the man, and there was no radioactive or other hazardous materials pertaining to the device, described as “a collection of things”. The DIY enthusiast was taken to hospital for evaluation and may be charged with inducing panic. *cleveland.com*, 6 Dec 2019.

AURAL STOWAWAYS

Susie Torres went to see her doctor in Kansas City, Missouri, thinking she had hot water in her left ear. It turned out to be a highly venomous brown recluse spider, which was safely removed. Luckily, it had not bitten her. Meanwhile in Vietnam, a doctor shared video of an unusual situation when a patient with ear pain had a large bee burrowing inside his ear canal, discovered with a small camera. It too was safely removed. [KSHB/CNN] 23 Aug; [UPI] 27 Aug 2019.

CRUNCHY BUT HALAL

When a biblical-style plague of desert locusts descended on Somalia, described by the UN as “an unprecedented and massive outbreak”, the inhabitants of the town of Adado turned this seeming misfortune into an opportunity after Islamic scholars declared the insects halal. Locals are now happily eating the pests, sharing tasty locust recipes on social media. *S.Mirror*, 22 Dec 2019.



MARTIN ROSS



STRANGE DAYS

SIDELINES...

PROXY STUDENTS

Tamanna Nusrat, a Bangladeshi MP from the ruling Awami League party, was expelled from university after hiring as many as eight lookalikes to take at least 13 exams in her place. She was studying for a BA degree with the Bangladesh Open University (BOU). The proxy students were protected by the MP's musclemen. *dailymail.co.uk, 23 Oct 2019.*

SNACK SURPRISES

Anna Elliott from County Down found a whole potato, the size of her fist, in a packet of Tesco crisps. And Andy Stubbs, 43, of Sidcup opened a bag of Wotsits to find it contained a single cheesy puff. (Each packet should contain 42 puffs, said maker Walkers.) A week earlier, Steve Smith, 41, of Bristol found a single solitary bean in a can of Heinz baked beans. There should have been around 465. *Sun, 9 Aug; D.Mail, Metro, 5+11 Sept 2019.*

A SERIOUS BITE

Sue Buttery, 68, from Highworth, Wiltshire, was taken to hospital with flu-like symptoms and put in a coma. She developed septicæmia and the flesh-eating bug necrotising fasciitis. Doctors took five days to trace the cause to an insect bite on her head. They had to amputate her fingertips and both legs below the knee. She spent eight months in hospital, but made a recovery. *Sun, 2 Oct 2019.*

LEG LOCK

Rachel Winnard, 35, of Rochdale, suffers from fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, which affects one in a million. Damaged muscles, tendons and ligaments regrow as bone, causing joints to freeze in place. First she lost control of her neck, arms and hips. Then she was locked in a standing position after her legs joints fused. "I can't do anything for myself," she said. *Sun, 8 Aug 2019.*

NOT AGAIN!

Last June, Kyler Bourgeois was gored and trampled by a bison at Antelope Island State Park, Utah. He suffered a collapsed lung, broken ribs and internal injuries. In September he was back in the park when his date, Kayleigh Davis, was charged and flipped by a bison. She hit the ground, her thigh gushing blood and her ankle fractured. *[CNN] 30 Sept 2019.*

RESCUE RARITIES



HEARTS & BONES RESCUE



MAC'S MISSION

TOP: The five-week-old rescue pup sporting an impressive 'tache. ABOVE: Narwhal, with his odd, tail-like facial appendage.

POIROT PUP

This five-week-old puppy was dumped at an animal rescue centre in Dallas, Texas, last July. The press likened its fine moustache to those of Salvador Dali and Hercule Poirot. *Sun, D.Mail, 31 July 2019.*

TAIL OF THE UNEXPECTED

An abandoned 10-week-old

pit bull rescued by Mac's Mission of Jackson, Missouri, who specialise in animals with special needs, has an additional tail-like appendage growing from his forehead. Narwhal (as the rescued pup has aptly been named) doesn't appear to notice his additional tail, and is otherwise happy and healthy. Mac's Mission

have been inundated with potential adoptees for Narwhal after he became a social media hit. But the rescue centre plan to keep looking after him for a while longer, to ensure his 'tail' doesn't grow any larger and cause him any problems. *BBC News, 13 Nov; D.Telegraph, 14 Nov; (Queensland) Courier Mail, 15 Nov 2019.*

**wellcome
collection**

BECOMING HUMAN

**"at every turn
the visitor will
find something
to fascinate"**

The Times



**"the most
accessible
museum space
ever opened
in Britain"**

New York Times

Free exhibition
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Wellcome's free museum and
library for the incurably curious



The fæcal philosopher's stone?

DAVID HAMBLING reports on the developing science of tweaking the human microbiome

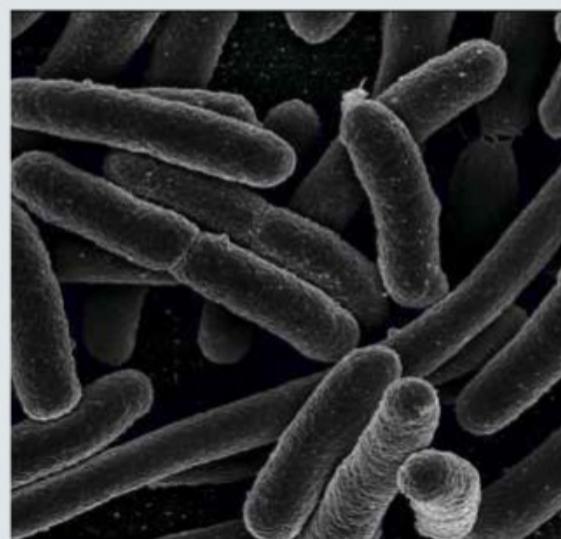
Scientists have known for years that the number of human cells in your body is outnumbered by your microbiome – the population of bacteria, protozoa, fungi, yeasts and viruses that live on and in your body, mainly in your gut. Now they are discovering just how much influence the microbiome has on our health, wellbeing and even our personality. What seemed like fringe science turns out to be accurate.

Traditionally, microbes were thought of as harmful ‘germs’ to be eradicated, but only a tiny percentage are pathogens that can cause disease. More perform a positive role. For example, small infants are not able to digest breast milk, but it is broken down by helpful gut bacteria. The study of the microbiome only began in earnest in 2004 but has rapidly gained momentum. In the consumer world, we see an increase in probiotics, foods claimed to contain or encourage ‘friendly bacteria’ with little scientific basis. But the real science has been pushing on.

One focus is so-called ‘handover bacteria’ transferred to babies during the process of birth. Children delivered by cæsarean section do not get these bacteria, and a 2018 study from the University of Luxembourg showed that such babies lack microbes which prime the immune system. This may be why those born by C-section have a greater lifetime risk for conditions including asthma and type 1 diabetes. More subtly, scientists have recently found that gut bacteria influence a child’s personality. A study from the University of Turku in Finland showed that babies with the highest proportion of one type of gut bacteria were more likely to be cheerful and exhibit what they termed positive emotionality.

The dramatic rise in the number of people suffering severe allergies may be related to changes in gut microbes. Children with allergies tend to have different microbial profiles from normal children, often looking more like the bacteria mix found in adults. One type of bacteria found only in infants (*anærostipes caccæ*) appears to provide protection against peanut allergy. However, as with the personality test, such research is largely descriptive. Scientists can see what has happened but understanding exactly why – and how to counteract it – will take years’ more work.

Other intriguing correlations have been found, in which patients with no other differences are affected by their



Researchers have found that the microbiome changes consistently during the aging process

microbiome. The microbiome has been linked to obesity, level of fertility, and how well patients respond to chemotherapy. Specific gut bacteria have been linked to depression and anxiety, and have also been found in people with autistic spectrum disorders. Top athletes have different microbiota from less able competitors.

Remediation is now possible as well as observation. There is already one seemingly bizarre treatment that has become accepted medical procedure. This is fæcal microbial transplantation or FMT, sometimes known by the more genteel name of bacteriotherapy, or jokingly as ‘trans-poo-sion’: moving material from one patient’s intestine to another. Typically, a fæcal transplant is used to counter the infamous *clostridium difficile* or *c. difficile*, an antibiotic-resistant bacterium causing severe and sometimes fatal gastrointestinal infection. Fæcal transplant helps restore the balance of gut bacteria and has proven effective in driving out the *c. difficile*; over 12,000 procedures are carried out each year in the US alone.

While this might all look like shiny new research, it has been present on the fringes much longer. The first fæcal transplant was carried out on a human in 1958, and vets have used the procedure to treat horses with diarrhoea for over a century, and have applied a similar process, known as transfaunation, to treat cows with digestive disorders since the 1950s. However, it is

only since the microbial science behind the process has been understood that the practice has really taken off.

At the other end of life, researchers have found that the microbiome changes consistently during the aging process. It is now possible to estimate someone’s age to within four years simply by looking at their gut microbes. Do old people have a particular type of microbiome, or does the microbiome affect aging? Researchers at Cambridge University’s partner Babraham Institute tested this by fæcal transplants from young mice with healthy immune systems to older mice whose immune systems were less effective. The transplant seemed to rejuvenate the microbiome of the older mice and restore their immunity. This might be a way of making old age healthier. Ultimately, it might extend lifespan.

There is an intriguing echo here of the *prima materia*, the starting ingredient for the philosopher’s stone or elixir of life of the alchemists which was said to cure illness and prolong life. The true nature of the *prima materia* is never revealed in alchemical writings, but references to its base and universal nature have led some to speculate that it was nothing more than dung.

The understanding of the microbiome is still in its early days. Already there has been some unlicensed experimentation, with an alarming rise in potentially dangerous home DIY fæcal transplants. There has already been one case in the US of a patient who died following a fæcal transplant, due to undetected bacteria in the sample.

“I hope in five years’ time we won’t be doing FMT anymore,” Dr Tariq Iqbal of the Microbiome Treatment Centre at the University of Birmingham told the *Guardian*. Iqbal would like to see medicine moving away from the crude technique of implanting donated fæcal material in the hope that it has the right mix of microbiota, and towards treatments based on a precise understanding of which organisms need to be encouraged or displaced.

The potential is huge. Given its impact on the immune system, being able to tweak the microbiome could have a massive impact on the future treatment of allergies, infectious diseases, cancer and even mental health. Future medicine might be based less on drugs and more on the right selection of foods based on analysis of patients’ stools. Simple dung might hold the secret to the philosophers’ stone after all.



STRANGE DAYS

CONFERENCE REPORT

LAPIS 2019

On the weekend of 9-10 November 2019, **PETER LAWS** headed to the frozen northlands of Lancashire, where he found a warm welcome and much weirdness

It might have been as cold as a penguin's pecker on the Fylde coast, but I found a warm and toasty welcome at a UK conference organised by the Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society. LAPIS was founded in the mid-1980s by Joseph and June Dorner, and as well as actively investigating paranormal cases it runs monthly pub gatherings and events as well as its highly acclaimed conferences.

I arrived in St Anne's, Lancashire, on the Friday for a night of ale and laughter at a former Lloyds TSB Bank now converted into a pub called Fifteen; it felt appropriately quirky to be drinking with fellow forteans in an old vault complete with a thick steel door. Then it was back to the Lindum Hotel for a sleep before the conference kicked off proper at the YMCA the following day.

FT regular Dr Rob Gandy was the first speaker, exploring the 'Mandela Effect, Cellular Memory and Transient Global Amnesia'. It was a fascinating exploration of the area where forteana meets the topic of memory. Next, we had open-minded sceptic Hayley Stevens, who spoke on 'The Trials and Tribulations of a Real-Life Ghostbuster'. Her tips for good practice in paranormal research were excellent, especially when peppered with her own fascinating experiences (including her stint working in what at least appears to have been a poltergeist-ridden Greggs bakery).

After lunch, Jason Gleaves turned our gaze skyward as we explored UFOs. Jason has worked for both the RAF and British Aerospace and is something of an expert in



ABOVE: LAPIS 2019 speakers (left to right): Hayley Stevens, Rob Whitehead, Stephen Mercer, Jackie Tonks, Rob Gandy, Peter Laws and Richard Freeman.

modern aircraft recognition. He's also a skilled graphic artist, which means he specialises in presenting detailed image analysis of UFO sightings. Filled with stills, video and detailed inspection, this was an action-packed hour.

The last talk of the first day came from another figure familiar to FT readers, cryptozoologist Richard Freeman, who has travelled the world hunting the yeti, the Tasmanian wolf, the Mongolian deathworm, the almasty, the giant anaconda and the orang-pendek. In his presentation, entitled 'Death by Cryptid', he shared rare cases in which cryptids have supposedly killed humans. It was a terrific talk, and led to one of the most bizarrely amusing exchanges of the weekend. Richard described the death of a woman whose body was thrown from the top of a cliff in Yosemite with such force that a rogue Sasquatch was suspected to be the culprit. During the Q&A, an audience member wrangled

with Freeman, unconvinced the woman had died in the fall. Listening to their lengthy back-and-forth – with Freeman repeatedly insisting, "But her head exploded on the ground", illustrated with vigorous hand gestures – made for an unexpected exchange; particularly when, after the exploded head theory was fully established, someone got up and announced: "Right, and now it's time for the raffle."

After a full day steeped in the strange, it was back to the hotel for drinks, a meal and then more drinks. I'm proud to say that I made it to bed at a respectable 1.30am – but that's because I was speaking the next morning.

The Sunday session started with a two minutes silence in honour of Remembrance Day, and then I got up to discuss my book *The Frighteners: Why We Love Monsters, Ghosts, Death and Gore*. After I'd explained (and defended) humanity's morbid streak, we were back in cryptid territory with Jackie Tonks, an

experienced Bigfoot investigator who once saw two Bigfoot walking in broad daylight. Her talk, 'Weird Bigfoot', was great fun, exploring the stranger side of Sasquatch lore, from the creature's links to UFOs to the recent, questionable boom in Bigfoot porn.

After lunch, Rob Whitehead took us on a whistle stop tour of the last 12 months in fortean news. It was a brilliant reminder of why weird stuff isn't just intriguing, it's often funny too – witness his report on the man caught having sex with a traffic bollard. In his power-point slide, Rob blocked out the bollards face for privacy reasons.

The last talk of the day was the most stylish, as Stephen Mercer, with top hat and cane, strolled onto the stage to tell us about the 'Ghosts of the Fylde Coast'. Stephen is known for his ghost tours in the area, and it was a bewitching presentation by a gifted storyteller.

Throughout the weekend there were plenty of stalls on-site, packed with books and paranormal products. I was so tempted to buy a beautiful painting of a Sasquatch, presented on a circular piece of wood. The conference was well organised and nicely varied in terms of speakers, but, as ever, one of the best bits of these events is sharing a pint with fellow weirdos. Let's face it: in normal circles, people tend to edge their chairs away from you if you start pondering the question of whether a Sasquatch uses its farts to induce hallucinations in witnesses. Here, though, you'll find fellow enthusiasts who'll discuss such leftfield fare late into the night. And there's something rather special about that.

If you've never tried a fortean style con, there are plenty to choose from these days, from Weird Weekend to ASSAP, but if you want to try LAPIS and missed this one, there's good news: it's already been announced that the LAPIS con will be back in Autumn 2020.

For more info, visit www.facebook.com/lapisconference/



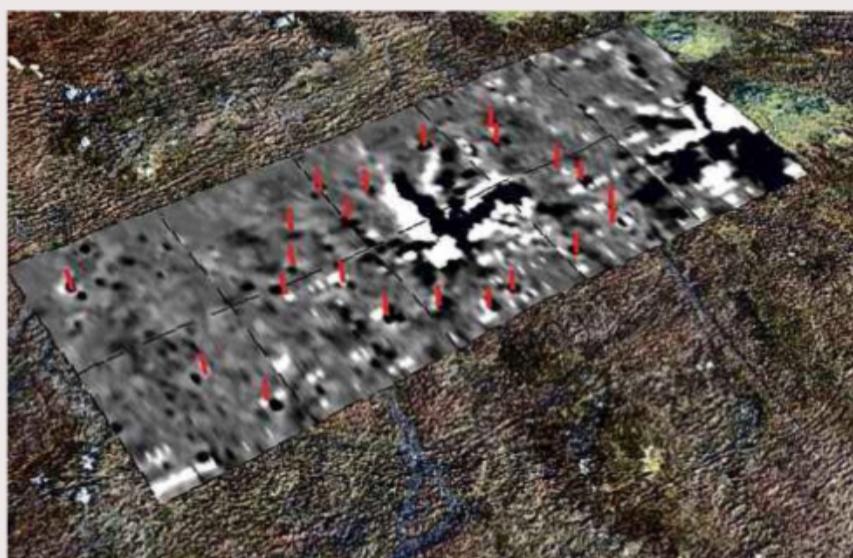
PAUL DEVEREUX finds some fascinating connections between strange lights and megalithic sites

FIRE FROM THE GODS

University researchers testing geophysical survey methods for studying ancient landscapes came up with findings that caused quite a stir at the end of 2019. The team's selected study landscape was that around the Callanish Stones complex on Scotland's Hebridean island of Lewis. The researchers' geophysical investigations revealed remarkable secrets at Airigh na Beinne Bige, known more prosaically as Site X1, which now consists of a single standing stone on a hillside overlooking the main Callanish Stones less than 3km (1.5 miles) away. The survey showed that the solitary standing stone was actually the remnant of what had been a stone circle. But the really startling finding was that the former ring of stones had encircled a powerful magnetic anomaly about 20m (65ft) across where there was a star-like marking etched deeply into the rock surface beneath the peat bog covering. The researchers interpreted the feature as resulting from a powerful ancient lightning strike, or multiple strikes. The thickness of the peat bog covering indicated that the marking was at least 3,000 years old. As Professor Vincent Gaffney, one of the five investigating researchers, remarked: "This was completely and utterly unexpected. Seeing the evidence for a massive strike, right in the middle of what now seems to be a stone circle, is remarkable." *'Geophysical Investigation of the Neolithic Calanais Landscape'*, *Remote Sensing* vol.11: 24, 2019; *Observer*, 31 Dec 2019.

TEMPLE LIGHTS

There has already been speculation that the star-like marking might have been caused by the discharge of ball lightning, or its close cousin, an earth light, with or without an accompanying lightning bolt – or perhaps the geophysical nature of the spot was the focus of a range of atmospheric phenomena over the years. The thought naturally arises as to whether the lightning event(s) inspired the building of the Neolithic stone circle at that specific spot. This is not a wild supposition, because we know such associations with anomalous light phenomena have been made elsewhere in the ancient world. It occurred at certain temple sites in Asia, for instance. To cite just a couple of examples: two pilgrimage shrines dedicated to the Goddess



LEFT: A geophysical survey revealed a star-shaped lightning strike in the middle of what was once a circle of standing stones (marked in red).
BELOW: The Callanish Stones.

Bhagbatti on the sacred Purnagiri Mountain of northern India were built because of local light phenomena. The lights were popularly believed to be votive lamps lit by a holy man. In *The Temple Tiger* (1934), Jim Corbett describes his visit to the temples, which can only be accessed by a narrow, dangerous cliff-path, in which he witnessed three strange lights, each about 2ft (60cm) in diameter, in a gorge. One light merged slowly with another, then more lights appeared. Or, again, the sacred Chinese mountains of Wu Tai Shan and Omei Shan apparently have, or at least had, large golden-orange light balls frequent their peaks at night. These were interpreted as 'Bodhisattva Lights'. In his book, *The Wheel of Life* (1959), traveller and adventurer John Blofeld described a visit in 1937 to Wu T'ai, where he found there was a tower on a temple constructed specifically to view the Bodhisattva Lights. From it he and companions saw "innumerable balls of fire" floating by. "Fluffy balls of orange-coloured fire, moving through space, unhurried and majestic – truly a fitting manifestation of divinity!" Blofeld exclaimed.

So it is no stretch of the imagination to consider that the Neolithic megalith



builders could have reacted in a similar way to strange light phenomena. For instance, the Dyffryn Ardudwy dolmen, between Barmouth and Harlech in Wales, sits on the Mochras Fault directly adjacent to where balls and columns of strange lights were seen emerging from the ground.

Or, in 1919, large balls of white light were seen by two observers to be drifting lazily to and fro above the Castlerigg stone circle in Cumbria. One of the light balls broke away and started to move towards the observers before fading away. One of the witnesses, a T Sington, wrote about the experience with considerable perspicacity in an engineering journal: "Suppose, owing to some local condition at present unknown, such lights have occurred from time to time near the site, they would have attracted the attention of the inhabitants, who, awestruck, would have attached great significance to them, and might then have selected the site as a place of worship or sacrifice."

EARTH SIGNS

It may be worth noting that the Callanish Stones and their satellite sites cluster closely around a distinctive pattern of local geological faulting – and many megalithic sites in the UK are situated on or close to faulting,¹ not just the aforementioned Dyffryn Ardudwy dolmen. Also, the Dragon Project (www.dragonprojecttrust.org) measured natural radiation levels at the Callanish sites much higher than the average regional background levels, whatever the significance of that might or might not be (we haven't as yet by any means divined all the subtle interactions of nature).

Finally, it ought to be mentioned that a strange light, which attracted local folklore, was seen fairly regularly "for generations" within a few miles of Callanish² – in fact, reports of earth light phenomena have been made sporadically for untold numbers of years on the island.

¹ Paul Devereux, *Places of Power*, 1990. (Also, *Powers of Ancient & Sacred Places*, forthcoming.)

² Ulrich Magin, "Highland Mysteries", *Info* 51, 1987.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

246: BEFORE GWYNETH

"A disease runs its course and then disappears – quite independently of treatment, whether by the poisoned teat of a cow, or the dried sore of a mummy' – Fort, *Books*, p1018

According to Steinmeyer's biography (p271), Fort, who distrusted doctors, spent years gathering clippings on medical topics, including mysterious ailments and weird treatments, planning to assemble them in a book to be entitled Medi-Vaudeville. Taken together, all this suggests that Fort may have been dipping into some of the more bizarre texts of his 'Thrice-Accursed Greeks'.

He surely would have been tickled by 'The White-Blessed' (apparently the Welsh meaning of Gwyneth) one's latest erotic bric-a-brac, advancing from genital steaming and jade balls to flogging golden dildos and candles that exude the smell of her vagina, a word that in Latin actually means either a scabbard or the covering of an ear of corn – intriguing etymological journey...

I'm not in the market for Paltrow's 'pussy perfumes'. Just as well, since they were reportedly at once sold out, not least thanks to Elton John who claims to have purchased "a ton of them". I'd have thought Elton would have preferred the odour of husband David Furnish's you-know-what. But, we will leave Elton to blow his candles in the wind.

As usual, the ancients were here first. Archaeologists have discovered dildos made variously of stone (ouch!), leather, and onyx. Various versions of the Egyptian tale of Isis (not yet a terrorist), Osiris, and Horus involve a golden one of these devices.

Naturally, much of what follows comes from the Elder Pliny's *Natural History*, especially book 28 – see Daisy Dunn's superlative *The Shadow of Vesuvius: A Life of Pliny* (2019 – heir to Mary Beard's throne. On the ancient female side there is Metrodora (dates uncertain, usually located in the 2nd-4th centuries AD, on no good evidence), with her treatise (63 chapters) *On the Diseases and Cures of Women* – watch for Holt Parker's annotated translation. That is, if she existed – some take the name (= 'Mother's Gifts') to be title rather than author.

Metrodora (I believe in her) suggests diverse exotic aphrodisiac ingredients: crocodile dung, menstrual blood, worms, the womb of a hare cooked in a frying pan.



Ultra-Gwyneth-daft, but how much more than the Chinese-Japanese obsession with rhinoceros horn? Her equally colourful contraceptive recipe with its cedar oil and wormwood is confirmed by some modern medical opinion as workable, in that cedar oil can act as spermicide by altering the vagina's acidity.

Gwyneth's GOOP vaginal eggs are supposed, amongst other benefits, to regulate menstrual cycles – California has brought lawsuits against such claims. Pliny might have given evidence for her. He offers such choice reassurances as that a naked, menstruating woman can repel hailstones and tornados, also that her flow will cure many diseases.

This is not just one old Roman's crankiness. His contemporary, the Spanish-born Columella, author of a prose-verse agricultural manual, recommends sending a naked virgin into fields to get rid of caterpillars and other pests.

Time, surely, for a new hashtag: #MEensesToo...

Pliny has a bewildering bag of aphrodisiac (and their opposite) tricks. Bat's blood smeared on wool and placed under the woman's head will drive her wild; so will goose's tongue mixed with food or drink. Above all, wear a hyena's anus on your sleeve and every woman will follow you, as they will if you sport the right testicle of a cock wrapped in a ram's skin – Romans, of course, had no irresistible aftershaves.

No Viagra, either. Not to worry. Pliny has the perfect stimulant: the right lobe of a vulture's lung, attached to the body in the skin of a crane. If no vulture's available, ingest five pigeon eggs dipped in honey

with hog lard mixed in and – Voilà!

If the object of coition is a baby, knot together the tail of a she-mule at the moment of penetration – and you thought rolling on a Durex tricky....

Gwyneth urges the value of vaginal steaming. The Græco-Roman method was fumigation with a farrago of human hair, herbs, and bitumen, introduced into the right spot via a lead pipe. Dangerous business, though, warned the Greek doctor Soranus (or Sore-Anus) – burnt vaginas were not unknown; Hot Totty indeed.

Moving south from Paltrow's tropical zone, I gather she is also preoccupied with pedicures. According to a website called LIfestyle.INQ, her specialist foot-man, Albin Brion, prepares celebrity tootsies for (say) Red Carpet appearances by working with chamois leathers, pearl buffing creams, and (to me) a mysterious 'diamond dust drill'.

Again, Pliny's GOOP LAB outshines. For corns and calluses, animal dung is the staple remedy; for sciatica, boiled goat's dung under the big toe. But, that's just his equivalent to Zam-buk, our old cure for chilblains, its constituents and 5,000 per cent price mark-up once challenged by the *British Medical Journal* (18 April 1908, pp942-4). All the more efficacious if used when a shooting star is visible. Gwyneth's headache prescriptions rely on her 'elimination diet'. Pliny nowadays would attract a mob of believers in his cure: when there's a shooting star, pour vinegar on a door hinge. Even better, bind a rope used to hang someone around your temples.

Did any Roman really believe in this stuff? According to Suetonius, emperor Vitellius's father did: "Because of his passion for a freedwoman, he mixed her saliva with honey as a throat remedy, not secretly or seldom, but openly and daily."

Pliny himself says he cured his own headaches by tying a woman's brassiere around his forehead – bit more erotic than Aspirin or Paracetamol. Can't improve on this remark by Amy Richlin in her essay (available online) 'Pliny's brassiere: Roman medicine and the female body,' inviting us to visualise "a man in a toga sitting and working late into the night, with a contraption on his head that looks like something Madonna would wear."

Doubtless, Gwyneth's bra is uplifting in more than one way. Won't dwell on her knickers; better, in her famous slogan, just to 'consciously uncouple' from this column.



STRANGE DAYS

COLLECTING MANIA

From beer cans to bricks, hole punches to Wombles, you can bet that someone, somewhere has a collection...



ABOVE: Nick West with a small display of his beer can collection. BELOW LEFT: Sam Watson and his vacuum cleaners. BELOW RIGHT: Mark Cranston with a favourite brick.

• Last April, Nick West, 59, of Langford in Somerset, was voted Britain's Dullest Man in an online poll. "I was really chuffed," he said. "I'm never going to be most handsome or tallest, so I'm quite happy with my mantle as dullest man." Mr West had featured in *Dull Men of Great Britain* (2015) alongside 39 other men deemed boring. He spent 44 years amassing the UK's largest collection of beer cans – 9,300 in total. "My wife and I drank nearly all the cans I've collected between us," he said. "I drank the beers and stouts and Debora would drink the lagers." The cans were "beautifully kept and curated," he said, with "curtains to stop them being damaged by light." However, he decided to trim down his £25,000 collection to just 1,500 cans, so that he and his wife can move to a smaller house. He sold 6,000 for £13,500 and gave 1,800 to a local museum, Oakham Treasures in Portbury. *Western Daily Press*, 13 April 2019.



• Mark Cranston, 56, a retired police sergeant, started collecting bricks nine years ago while seeking something to keep the garage door open. Now he has 3,500. He is looking for more space after filling his shed in Jedburgh, Scottish Borders. Highlights include a firebrick from SS Politician, which sank in 1941 while carrying 264,000 bottles of whisky, inspiring the film *Whisky Galore!* There's also a drainage tile from 1833 and a



brick from the execution block of Glasgow's HMP Barlinnie. "Each brick tells a story," he said. "It takes up a lot of time but it's a passion. Ultimately, the aim is a museum where people can come and see them all. My wife tolerates my hobby and has been on 'hunts'." Five years ago. He set up the Scottish Brick History database, which has enabled him to team up with others who get kicks out of bricks. *D.Mail, Sun*, 12 Sept 2019.

• Peter Duffell's passion is hole punches. The 82-year-old retired teacher from Lichfield in Staffordshire began his collection in the 1970s while teaching French at a secondary school. He found a hole punch "in a sorry state" at a car boot sale and refurbished it. On 4 September he sold his collection of 204 hole punches at auction, raking in £450, more than double the estimate. Mrs Duffell, 78, was much relieved to see the back of them. *D.Mail, Sun*, 15 Aug; *Sun on Sunday*, 15 Sept 2019.

• Over the last 40 years, David Warrow, 71, a retired garage owner, has amassed 85 vintage pedal cars for children, thought to be the biggest private collection of its kind in the world. It includes Rolls-Royces, Bugattis, Jaguars and Bentleys. To preserve and display them, he built a dehumidified showroom next to his house in Chiverton, Devon. However, having got bored with them, he planned to



PAUL AMOS / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: June Amos, nearly obscured by her Pink Panther collection. **BELLOW LEFT:** Peter Duffell wields a hole punch. **BELLOW RIGHT:** Gill Seyfang – now wombling free. **BOTTOM:** Some of what was until recently the world's largest Wombles memorabilia collection.

dispose of them at auction on 8 September. Estimate: £200,000. *D.Mail*, 17 Aug 2019.

- Roy West, 75, has been collecting clocks for nearly 40 years and has around 5,000. They cover every inch of wall space in his tiny two-bedroom flat in Eastleigh, Hampshire, with 25 of them chiming every 15 minutes. Roy, who lives with his wife Pauline, 68, has 30 bedside clocks plus many more on the bedroom walls. With the reversion to GMT on 26 October, he spent more than five hours ensuring they all showed the right time. *Sun*, 26 Oct 2019.

- Sam Watson, 32, of Thame, Oxfordshire, is a sucker for vacuum cleaners and has spent 20 years amassing 100 models, which he regularly services and cleans to keep them in tip-top shape. He keeps a spreadsheet documenting each device and creates videos to help people understand their machines. “I got my first vacuum from the tip when I was a kid – a Hoover Junior. Now I buy them as cheap as I can and have spent about £500 over the years,” he said. “I buy broken ones and fix them. Now that I have so many, I have to keep them in the loft.” He actually hates cleaning, he admitted. *Metro*, *D.Mail*, 15 Nov 2019.



GILL SEYFANG

- The owner of the world's largest Wombles memorabilia – 1,703 toys and other pieces – is selling up. Gill Seyfang, 50, has spent 35 years buying items related to the characters who picked up litter on Wimbledon Common. She told *FT*: “As a kid in the 1970s, the Wombles’ environmental message of recycling rubbish made a huge impression on me. They were eco-warriors ahead of their time, and I fell in love with them and their hope for the future. My academic career in sustainable development is aimed at working out how we can all live a little bit more like the Wombles. Now after 35 years of collecting and getting the Guinness World record for the largest collection of wombles memorabilia, I’ve gone as far as I can, so it’s time to let them go. I hope my collection will go on to spread the environmental message to a new generation.” *D.Mirror*, 25 Oct 2019.

- June Amos, 79, has 1,404 toys, ornaments and keepsakes of the Pink Panther cartoon big cat. Her obsession began when her husband bought her a Pink Panther cuddly toy in 1984. June, a retired cake decorator, stores the ceramic figures in her bedroom and sitting room while soft toys and videos have taken over her spare room in Broadstairs, Kent. *Sun*, 25 Nov 2019.

For more collecting mania, turn to the feature on p36.

GILL SEYFANG



STRANGE DAYS

ASTRAL NEWS

All the latest from across the Universe: weird green blobs, very expensive Moon dust, mighty space mice and a black hole that shouldn't be there...



NASA

ABOVE: The green blobs that had NASA scientists scratching their heads: no one knows what causes the colours. BELOW: A video feed shows some of the eight mice that travelled to the International Space Station to help explore muscle loss in astronauts.

GREEN BLOBS STUMP NASA

While studying a supernova in the distant Fireworks galaxy (NGC 6946), a NASA space observatory saw extremely bright sources of X-ray light that resulted in dazzling flashes of blue and green. The 772lb (350kg) NuSTAR (Nuclear Spectroscopic Telescope Array) mission was deployed in 2012 with the goal of observing the “high-energy X-rays more closely, in higher resolution, than any space telescope before it.” When the NuSTAR began monitoring the supernova, the green blob near the bottom of the galaxy wasn’t visible, only emerging on the 10th day of study. Another NASA telescope confirmed that the blob had dissolved as soon as it appeared. This phenomenon has been observed before, but it’s extremely rare. It’s called an ultra-luminous X-ray source, or ULX. This one is named ULX-4, because it’s only the fourth one ever observed in the Milky Way.

For short periods of time a supernova can generate enough visible light to outshine entire galaxies made up of billions of stars. “Ten days is a really short time for such a bright object to appear,” said Hannah Earnshaw, a postdoctoral researcher at Caltech in Pasadena, California, and lead author of the new study. “We don’t often observe a source multiple times in quick

succession.” Nobody is sure what causes the colours, but it could be light generated from the accretion disc of a black hole. Accretion discs are traffic jams built into black holes. They pull in matter so quickly that there’s not enough space for it all, so the waiting matter spins around the black hole at such speeds that it illuminates a bright whiteness. Most ULXs are long-lived, but this one was brief, so it could have been triggered by a quick event – something like a black hole destroying a nearby star. Or maybe the source of ULX-4 was a neutron star, one of the densest objects in the Universe. These are formed when a star’s explosion doesn’t generate enough energy for a black hole, but they can nonetheless create accretion discs.

Out in the Universe, time equals distance – so the duration of a phenomenon indicates the size of its source. This makes very brief, very energetic events hard to explain. How could so much energy come from such a small source? *popularmechanics.com*, 6 Sept 2019.

MIGHTY SPACE MICE

Eight musclebound mice blasted off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, in December 2019, on board a SpaceX Dragon capsule bound for the International Space Station (ISS) that is orbiting Earth at an altitude of 220 miles (354km). They have been genetically manipulated so that they lack myostatin, a protein that limits muscle growth, meaning their skeletal muscle mass can reach twice normal size.



The eight mighty mice are amongst a crew of 40 which docked at the ISS as part of an exploratory mission to explore muscle and bone loss in astronauts, which is an effect of microgravity (gravity so weak that there is effectively none, resulting in the condition of weightlessness). They will be studied as they remain in orbit for 40 days, after which they will return to Earth to be examined.

Scientists looking at how muscle and bone are affected by a microgravity environment are aiming to minimise the risks of interplanetary space travel. It is anticipated that voyages to Mars will take place in the near future, a journey expected to take several years.

Also on board is a commercial experiment on behalf of the brewing giant Anheuser-Busch, testing the malting capabilities of barley seeds in microgravity to see whether it is feasible to brew beer in space. NASA intends to send human (as opposed to rodent) crews to Mars in the 2030s. *Times*, 6 Dec 2019.

TABBY'S STAR

In 2015, astronomers discovered what’s become known as one of the strangest stars in the Universe. KIC 8462852 (aka Tabby’s Star or Boyajian’s Star) is odd, because it goes through dramatic and apparently random periods of growing dimmer (from our perspective on Earth). Stars tend to dim when planets or huge clouds of dust pass in front of them, but those types of events usually happen on a regular basis, and only account for a slight dimming. But the 2015 dimming observed at KIC 8462852 doesn’t fit the usual patterns of planets, or a companion star (it does have one, but it’s very distant, so won’t suffice as an explanation). To make things weirder, a 15 per cent decrease in brightness has been recorded for KIC 8462852 over the past century.

Three years ago, observations of the distant star, located 1,400 light years away, showed a reoccurrence of a potentially



ABOVE: The Soviet Luna 16 probe, the first robotic probe to successfully land on the Moon, collect lunar soil samples and return them to Earth. INSET: The Moon dust up for sale at Leski Auctions, Melbourne.

A HANDFUL OF DUST

A tiny amount of Moon dust collected in 1970 by the Soviet Union space probe Luna 16 could prove to be one of the most expensive substances ever, as sold by weight. 0.4g of the lunar dirt, weighing less than half a paperclip, went under the hammer in Australia on 11 December 2019. By comparison, diamonds sell at \$55,000 per gram, and plutonium at \$4,000 per gram.

The dust is contained in a flat quartz vial sealed with gold, itself inside a jewel case. To the naked eye, it resembles a very fine grey volcanic soil, but nanotechnology enhanced photos show patterns created by bombardment from solar winds over tens or hundreds of millions of years.

Melbourne auctioneer Charles Leski who is handling the sale expected it to make between \$500,000 and \$750,000, with a value of between \$125,000 and \$187,500 for each 0.1g. Part of a 261-job lot of aviation and lunar memorabilia, the dust originally belonged to a former Soviet scientist who was given a share of Luna 16's original sample. It had been sitting in his bank vault for 30 years after he emigrated to Australia in the 1980s.

In 1993, three 0.2g samples of the same Moon dust were sold at US Sothebys for \$442,500, and last year the same samples made \$855,000. *D.Mail*, 5 Dec; (*Sydney*) *D.Telegraph*, 6 Dec 2019.

major dimming event.

Astronomer Jason Wright initially advanced a hypothesis that giant alien megastructures, such as a partially constructed Dyson sphere, might explain the odd patterns of dimming, including dimming over the last century, which, while slow to us, is actually significantly fast on cosmic time scales. But in May 2017, Wright claimed the star had dimmed very suddenly by three per cent in just a few days, asking astronomers with telescopes to keep them trained on KIC 8462852: "And so we are officially on alert and we are asking astronomers on telescopes... to please take spectra (light measurements) of the star."

Admittedly, most scientists, including Wright, don't think it very likely there is an alien civilisation building planet-size structures around one of their stars. It's more likely, they believe, that something like a swarm of colliding comets around the star

is responsible for the phenomena. But the star's behaviour continues to be very unusual to the point that most potential explanations can't really be ruled out, including industrious aliens.

Indeed, researchers have checked KIC 8462852 for evidence of an intelligent civilisation, it being hypothesised that an advanced civilisation would have developed laser technology, and that the resultant laser signals would be detectable. However, the research team (UC Berkeley SETI) concluded that all the most promising signals "can all be explained as either cosmic ray hits, stellar emission lines or atmospheric air glow emission lines." *cnet.com*, 19 May 2017; *sciencealert.com*, 27 Feb 2019.

BLACK HOLE MYSTERY

An international team of scientists using China's sophisticated LAMOST telescope has discovered a black hole so huge that it is twice as large as

any that were believed to be possible. LB-1 is 15,000 light years from Earth with a mass 70 times greater than our Sun. "Black holes of such mass should not even exist in our galaxy, according to most of the current models of stellar evolution," said lead researcher Liu Jifeng, professor of the National Astronomical Observatory of China, adding "now theorists will have to take up the challenge of explaining its formation."

There are an estimated 100 million stellar black holes in the Milky Way, and scientists believe there are two types. The most common are stellar black holes (up to 20 times more massive than the Sun), formed when a very large star's centre collapses in on itself, usually after a supernova explosion at the end of the star's life. The rarer supermassive black holes are at least a million times bigger than the Sun, but their origins are uncertain. Researchers believed that typical

Milky Way stars shed most of their gas through stellar winds, preventing the formation of a black hole as huge as LB-1.

Physicist David Reitze of the California Institute of Technology explained that LB-1's large mass falls into a range "known as the 'pair instability gap' where supernovae should not have produced it." Therefore its formation must have been via another, as yet unknown physical method. *[AFP]*, 27 Nov 2019.

WET PLANET

Water vapour has been detected in the atmosphere of an exoplanet 110 light years away from Earth. K2 18b is the first known planet orbiting a distant star that might have liquid water. It may even have water clouds and rain, suggest scientists. Observations using NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, launch date 2021, could help determine if K2 18b has water, and if so, how much. *sciencenews.org*, 18 Dec 2019.



STRANGE DAYS

MEDICAL BAG

Rosemary really might be for remembrance according to new research – plus, a pill for recovering suppressed traumas, and the teens with no memories



MARIO LAPORTA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Antonio Vassallo, 100 years old, and his wife Amina Fedollo, 93, in their house in Acciaroli, southern Italy, where citizens are unusually long-lived. **FACING PAGE:** Rosie Paley, who lost all her long-term memory after suffering a seizure in 2011.

RECOVERED MEMORY PILL?

Scientists have discovered a drug they say aids the recovery of suppressed memories. Psychologists have long argued that trauma may be repressed, but the theory has come under fire in recent years, with several high-profile child sexual abuse cases where memories of trauma are thought to have been implanted by investigators, therapists or counsellors.

Now, researchers at Northwestern University, Illinois, claim their study demonstrates that if the brain is in a state of heightened arousal at the time the original experience is ‘recorded’, the memory can be recalled (or ‘played back’) if the mind is again placed in that heightened state.

Mice were subjected to an experiment where their GABA memory receptors were stimulated with the drug gaboxadol, then given an electric shock. (Trauma such as child abuse is thought to trigger GABA receptors). When the drug wore off, the mice had forgotten the shock and were moving about happily, but given more gaboxadol, they froze, anticipating another shock.

“When the mice were returned to the same brain state created by the drug, they remembered the stress,” claims Dr Jelena Radulovic, professor of bipolar disease at Northwestern’s Feinberg School of Medicine. She says the rodents’ drugged brains employed different molecular pathways and neural circuits to store the memory. *D.Telegraph*, 18 Aug 2015.

ROSEMARY FOR REMEMBRANCE

Meanwhile, English folkloric advice that rosemary enhances memory (slipped in the pocket of an errant lover, the herb is said to help them remember their vows of fidelity; Shakespeare’s Ophelia spoke of rosemary “for remembrance” in *Hamlet*) has received scientific endorsement.

A 2016 study by the University of Northumbria found that a sample group of 150 pensioners sitting in a room diffused with the scent of rosemary enjoyed enhanced memory, with test scores boosted by 15 per cent. A separate experiment by the same research team found that peppermint

may also help to boost memory. Peppermint was noted as enhancing both long-term and working (short-term) memory as well as alertness.

In the same year, a four-year study of 300 pensioners living in Acciaroli, a southern Italian fishing village near Salerno, was begun. The ‘Mediterranean diet’ (including rosemary and other herbs, fish, fresh fruit and vegetables, and olive oil) has long been regarded as a healthy one, with cardiac and other benefits. Acciaroli is renowned for its long-lived citizens, and rosemary is one ingredient known to have positive metabolic effects on longevity.

The long-term study by researchers from Rome’s Sapienza University and UCLA was hoped to shed new light on this. Around 50 researchers, medical experts, geneticists and local doctors took blood samples, disseminated questionnaires, and carried out interviews in order to conduct a full genetic analysis and examine diet and lifestyle.

An unusual number of Acciaroli’s 2,000 citizens are over 100 years old. There is also a remarkably

low incidence of Alzheimer’s or heart disease. Preliminary investigations suggest exercise may be a factor: many of the oldest villagers worked in nearby fields for decades, and still regularly walk or ride bicycles. Prof Salvatore Di Somma of Sapienza University (and leader of the joint Italian-US research project) said of Acciaroli’s centenarians: “Not only do they live long, they also live well.” *D.Telegraph*, 31 Mar, 27 April 2016.

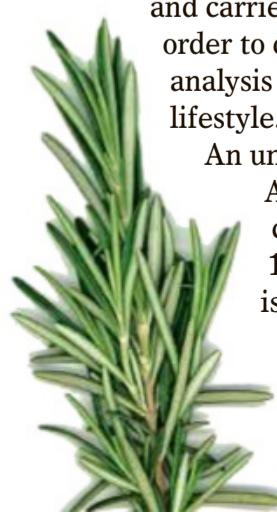
TOTAL ERASURE

A Yorkshire, teenager who hit his head during a rugby match lost his memory each night he went to sleep, and had to learn pretty much everything all over again the next day, including his girlfriend’s name, his favourite music, and the route home from the shops. Some memories would return during the day, but Sam Tai, then aged 17, had to re-learn them the following day. At the time, his mother Jane said: “He can’t go to the gym. He can’t go for a run. He attends college once a week but can’t remember his lessons. He has a few random memories but he can’t really recollect anything from birth.”

Mr Tai, of Fulford, near York, was stretchered off with an injury sustained during a junior rugby league game in March 2017, and noticed the memory loss later that night. The condition persisted for two months, but his memory gradually returned.

The case is reminiscent of that of Rosie Paley, who lost all her memories after suffering a severe seizure in 2011, having contracted encephalitis at the age of 16. When she came round, her long-term memory had disappeared, and she couldn’t recognise her mother or her two younger brothers, nor could she remember her favourite food, band, or the fact that she could ride a horse.

Two years later, the trainee hairdresser was still having to write lists reminding her how to do everyday tasks. Ms Paley, from Brierly Hill in the West Midlands, kept bus timetables



MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

and routes with her to ensure she didn't become lost. In an effort to rekindle her memory, her parents showed her old photo albums. "Looking back at pictures", Ms Paley said, "I can see I had an amazing childhood. I just wish I had the memories to go with the pictures". Fortunately, her long-term memory did eventually return, although she still struggled with short-term memory loss and continued to rely on lists for daily activities.

Ricky Dean, 19, has a more severe form of amnesia. Starved of oxygen shortly after birth, he has never had any short- or long-term memory. Each morning when he wakes up he has no recollection of the previous day's events. He carries an iPhone, which he refers to as his 'memory', worn around his neck; It carries various lists stored on it, including his 'Morning Routine' which reminds him to shower, shave, breakfast and feed the dog. Other lists remind him to brush his teeth, meet his friends, and what his favourite drinks are. There are lists with a night routine, things to do before going to bed, and reminders to lock doors before leaving the house in his home town of Taunton, Somerset. One folder is named 'What to do if you get lost'. "If I follow my lists, I know I'll be OK," he says, "But when things go wrong – if I forget to check my phone – it can be very difficult indeed."

Mr Dean's parents, hairdresser Nicki, 46, and Gary, 40, of Avon & Somerset Police, make video recordings of his experiences – such as a trip on a rollercoaster – to act as a 'memory' of events for him to watch in future. To add to his difficulties, Ricky has been diagnosed with autism, thought to have been caused by the heart problem he had as a baby that caused the brain to be temporarily starved of oxygen.

"It's very hard for Ricky to love anybody," said his mother. "He doesn't 'get' emotions. For instance, someone would have to be really

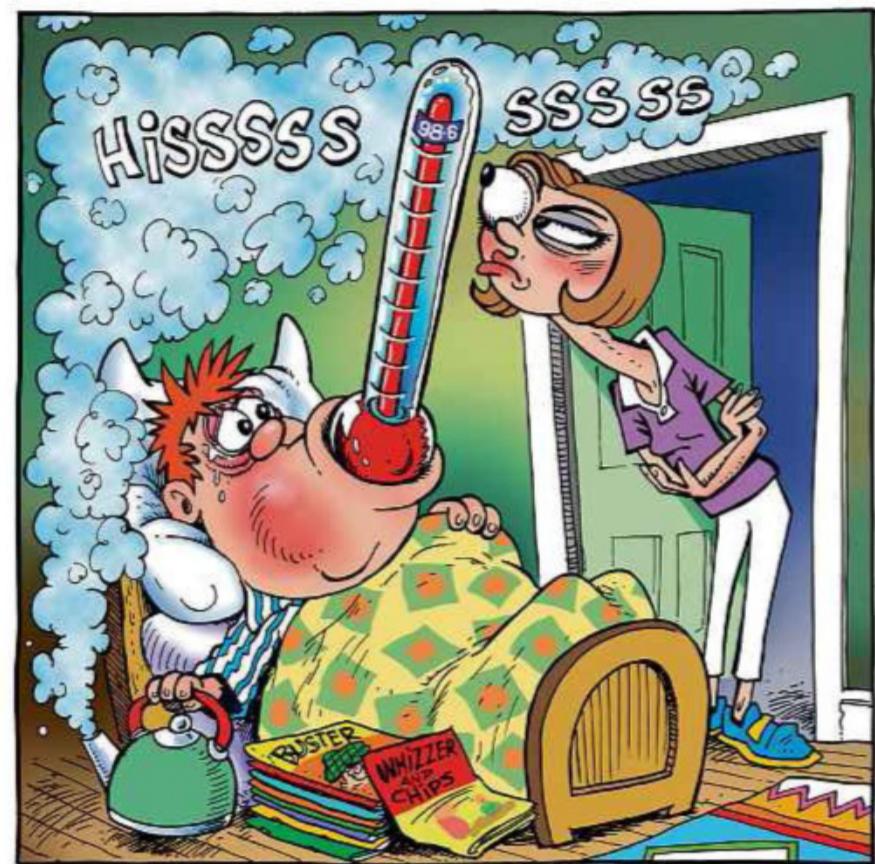
sobbing for him to realise they were upset." Noting that this is not uncommon in people with autism, Nikki adds that the difficulty is "made worse by his memory problems, because his brain doesn't 'remember' much about emotions."

Until the age of 17, Ricky did not go out without his parents, but his iPhone with its numerous lists have given him the confidence to do so. He has two close friends who he regularly goes out with; his parents trust them as his unofficial 'carers' when he's with them. Making new friends is very difficult, as Ricky remembers faces but not names, and says it can take him a long time to learn who someone is.

He studies land and environment at a special needs college and would like to work with animals, but his father Gary understands that unless hired by someone prepared to undertake close supervision, he may be unemployable. Ricky has a girlfriend, Lauren, who also suffers from memory impairment. They meet up every couple of weeks; his mother has to remind him to text her to arrange a date. Ricky is reported as having an admirable stoicism and remarkable absence of self-pity. "If I'm having a bad week, I can get very angry with it, but generally I try to brush it off," he says. "Of course I'd like to visit a friend who lives in another city... but I try not to dwell on the negatives." *D.Mail, 10 Aug 2010, 13 Aug 2013, 15 June 2016; D.Telegraph, 14 Aug 2013; D.Mirror, 18 May 2016.*



246: RUNNING A TEMPERATURE



The myth

The normal human temperature is 98.6F (37C).

The "truth"

Many readers will remember that tense moment on a winter morning: your mother scrutinising the glass thermometer which she has just removed from your mouth, and on which your immediate happiness depends. If the reading is above 98.6 that means you officially "have a temperature" and can legitimately stay home from school. Today, experts have two objections to this simplistic diagnosis: there is no such temperature as "normal", and even if there was one it wouldn't be 98.6. That number originated with German thermometry pioneer Carl Reinhold August Wunderlich, author of *Das Verhalten Der Eigenwärme in Krankheiten* (1868), published in English as *On the Temperature in Diseases*. Using data from 25,000 patients, he established that 98.6F was the mean temperature amongst healthy subjects. But a study at the University of Maryland in the 1990s found that the famous number had no statistical significance. Further investigation revealed that Wunderlich's thermometer – a gigantic armpit model which took 20 minutes per reading – was calibrated higher than modern and even contemporary instruments. Currently, "normal" is seen as a range rather than a fixed point, with variations caused by age, sex, race, time of day, stage of menstrual cycle, medical condition, diet, activity level, and type of thermometer.

Sources

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/400116>; www.wired.com/story/98-degrees-is-a-normal-body-temperature-right-not-quite/; www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323819.php#adults; www.mentalfloss.com/article/544046/why-myth-average-human-body-temperature

Mythchaser

Another thing we were all told as kids: when you're washing your hair, you can tell it's clean because it squeaks. But a hairdresser of this column's acquaintance insists that the time-honoured squeaky test is a myth. We seek trichological clarity, please.





STRANGE DAYS

NECROLOG

This month, one of the key figures from classic-era *Doctor Who* goes to the great TARDIS in the sky, and a well-known TV psychic heads to the other side



ABOVE LEFT: Terrance Dicks (centre) with Barry Letts (left) and Jon Pertwee (right). ABOVE RIGHT: Derek Acorah appearing on Celebrity Big Brother in 2017.



TIM P WHITBY / GETTY IMAGES

TERRANCE DICKS

Although the name may be unfamiliar, Terrance Dicks is probably responsible for a lot of us reading these pages – and for some of us he's responsible for our love of reading more generally.

Dicks is best known for his association with the British science fiction series *Doctor Who*. Starting in 1968, he was assistant script editor for the show and the following year he was promoted to script editor (this was the equivalent of what would today be the head writer role). As a result, he was able to steer the show in new directions, introducing the Timelords and much other lore we now take for granted.

He also brought many fortean ideas to the stories. As script editor he oversaw the 1973 Jon Pertwee story "The Green Death" (forever known by people of a certain age as 'The One With The Maggots'), an anti-pollution story before such things were as mainstream as they are now. He oversaw the production of "The Daemons" (1971), complete with ancient astronauts and one of the few instances in the show where genuine magic is seen. He wrote one of the most

fortean of all Who stories, "The Horror of Fang Rock" (1977), which at last provided an explanation for the Flannan Isle lighthouse mystery. He wasn't shy of taking ideas from literature, two of the most relevant being the vampires of "The State of Decay" (1980) and the Frankenstein story given an outer space spin in "The Brain of Morbius" (1976) – and just for luck he wrote Tom Baker's first story, "Robot" (1975), which has many parallels with *King Kong*.

After *Doctor Who*, Dicks became a prolific author of the much-loved Target novelisations of the TV episodes – for many, in the pre-video age, the only way to relive older episodes – writing over 60 of them as well as contributing to various *Doctor Who* spin-off publications. He produced many stories that appealed strongly to young forteans: there were tales in which the Doctor met the Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster or travelled to alternate dimensions, as well as what were essentially hollow earth stories, such as "The Silurians".

With his success in this area, Dicks was courted by publishers as a children's author and

went on to write well over 100 original novels.

Dicks clearly loved his time on *Doctor Who* and was a regular guest at conventions over the years, usually as a double act with his *Doctor Who* producer Barry Letts. No matter how many times he heard the same questions he always gave enthusiastic answers, and anyone who spent time with him came away with stories of his friendly and giving nature. He did other work as well, including adapting classic novels for the BBC and writing for *Crossroads*, but it is for his work on *Doctor Who* that he will be remembered.

Terrance William Dicks, prolific Doctor Who writer and ambassador, born East Ham, 14 April 1935; died London, 29 August 2019, aged 84.

Gordon Rutter

DEREK ACORAH

TV psychic Derek Acorah was born Derek Johnson in Bootle, Merseyside. Originally a footballer with a Liverpool FC contract (he later claimed to have contacted Liverpool manager Bill Shankly in the spirit world), he began his TV career by appearing on *Psychic Livetime*, followed by his own

series, *Predictions with Derek Acorah*. He claimed to have inherited his psychic gifts from his grandmother, whose husband's spirit he said he had encountered on the staircase. His mediumship was aided by a spirit guide, Sam, a 2,000-year-old Ethiopian warrior.

He became well-known for his appearances on *Most Haunted*, which became one of Living TV's most popular shows. Here, he rose to fame alongside Yvette Fielding, but left the show in 2005 after six series following allegations of fakery. He had been duped during filming at Bodmin Gaol in Cornwall by fellow presenter Dr Ciarán O'Keeffe, the show's resident parapsychologist. Perhaps mindful of the 'Philip experiment' (a 1972 group psychology experiment whereby a fictional 17th-century historical character was invented; the group then attempted to contact 'Philip' via a séance, and reportedly experienced unexplained phenomena, apparently in response to their questions; see FT383:60-61), O'Keeffe had invented a former South African prison warden named Kreed Kafer. Acorah claimed to sense Kafer's spirit in the gaol, even

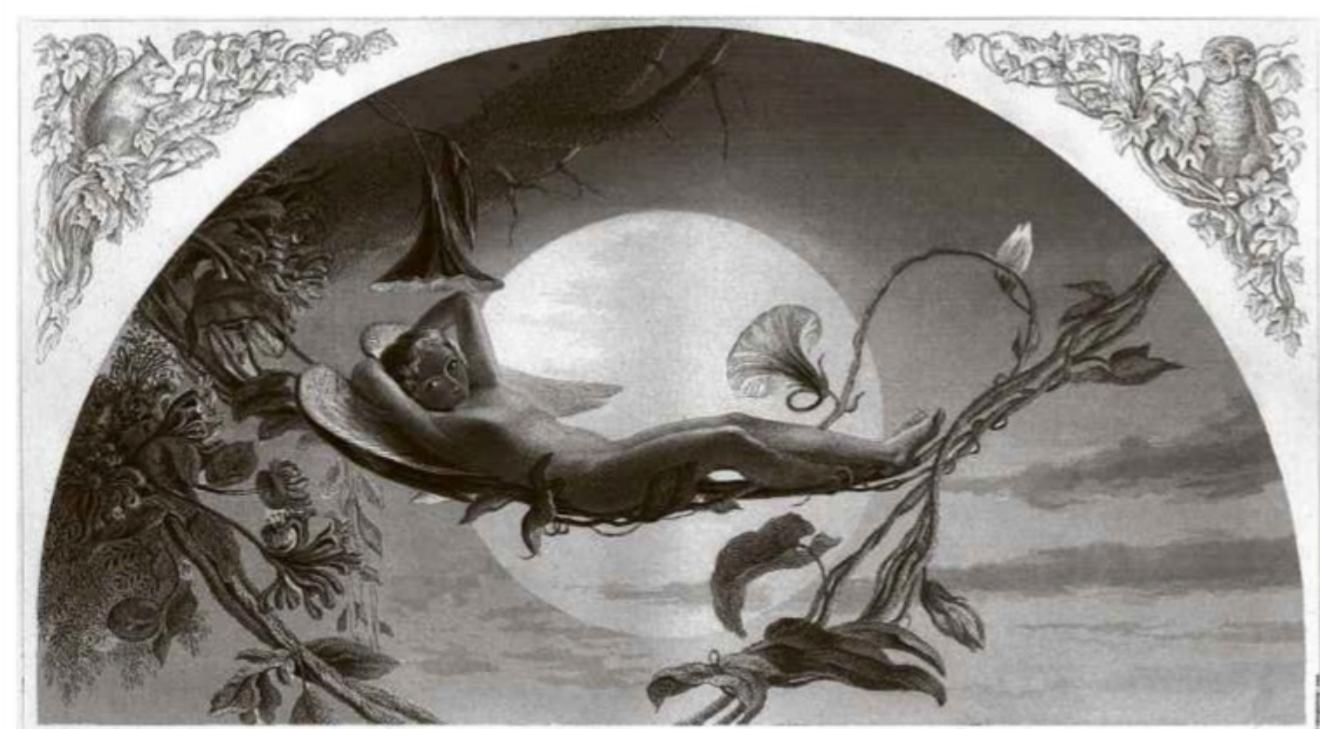


becoming possessed by him, unfortunately failing to realise that the name 'Kreed Kafer' was an anagram of 'Derek Faker'. Another spirit allegedly contacted by Acorah was one 'Rik Eedles' (anagram for 'Derek Lies'). Fellow presenter Yvette Fielding later said: "We tell people everything is real, then it turns out he was a fake, so he had to go." Acorah insisted that he had indeed been possessed, but admitted the spirit had been masquerading as 'Kafer', saying: "I can say that I had, yes, had been taken over by an entity, but the identity would have been other than that of the name that came from me." Despite the *Most Haunted* fraud allegations, Acorah had numerous private clients who were confident in his mediumship abilities.

Acorah became a regular television fixture, even appearing as himself in the 2006 *Doctor Who* story "Army of Ghosts", but his 2009 live televised séance with the late 'King of Pop' on *Michael Jackson: the Search for his Spirit* was derided by critics and viewers alike. He was forced to apologise to the parents of missing child Madeleine McCann in 2012, after saying she had "joined the spirit world" (the McCanns maintain their daughter is still alive). In 2017, Acorah made an appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, coming fourth.

A year before his death from pneumonia in January 2020 (aged 69), Acorah gave an interview in which he spoke about the afterlife, saying: "Death is a transition. It's letting go of a way of life in the physical to go and see a broader scope of what is the intention of all of us human beings. Life is continuous but in a different way. We can never be snuffed out." He is survived by his third wife, Gwen, whom he married in 1995, and by his son, Carl, from his first marriage.

Derek Acorah, spirit medium and TV psychic, born Bootle, Merseyside, 27 Jan 1950; died Scarisbrick, Lancashire, 4 Jan 2020, aged 69.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

20TH CENTURY CURSES

The crime of witchcraft was abolished in Great Britain in 1735. Parliamentary legislation did not, though, magically dispel witchcraft beliefs here. For several more decades there were cases of violence, even mob violence, against men and women who were believed to be witches: if you thought that you or your family were bewitched, one sure cure was to make the witch bleed either with a pin or thorn. So when did witchcraft belief really disappear from Britain? The historian Owen Davies has shown, in several publications, that witchcraft belief (and associated violence) lasted surprisingly late, giving some examples from around the time of the Great War (1914-1918). However, it's possible that even Davies has underestimated the sheer stamina of witchcraft belief.

In a new book, *Cursed Britain*, Thomas Waters suggests not just that witchcraft beliefs survived late, but that they did so with surprising strength. Certainly, he has gathered together a remarkable number of 20th-century examples. In 1904, a mother in Brighton claimed her baby had been killed by a neighbouring witch. In 1935, a woman blamed a run of misfortune, which led to her suicide, on being 'overlooked'. "Alleged witches and ill-wishers were attacked at Grimsby (Lincolnshire) in 1911, Brixham (Devon) in

1919, Clyst St Lawrence (Devon) in 1924, and East Dereham (Norfolk) in 1940. In 1916 a Somerset farmer shot dead a man he thought had bewitched his daughter and his horses."

On this evidence, traditional witchcraft belief lasted long enough to be on nodding terms with the new witches of Wicca in the 1920s.

Waters focuses strongly on the believers rather than the witches: the men and women who thought that they were being magically set upon. In fact, for Waters, witches as such don't exist outside the fevered imagination of the unlucky 'victim'. I wonder if this is right. Waters also gives space to cunning men and cunning women: the white witches who were called in to deal with cases of 'overlooking'. These cunning folk specialised in getting stolen goods back, warding off black magic and... in cursing people.

I've always been confused by the way that most witchcraft experts deny the existence of witchcraft, while still accepting that cunning folk carried out acts of black magic. Some of those marginal figures who were set upon by neighbours, called 'witches', and made to bleed were unquestionably innocent. But some also dabbled in curses. Take Mother Herne, a 'white' witch who died in 1924. Waters gives examples – stories or facts? – of her successfully cursing those who got on her wrong side. Witchcraft, even late witchcraft, was perhaps more than just paranoia.

A MOTHER
IN BRIGHTON
CLAIMED HER
BABY HAD BEEN
KILLED BY A
NEIGHBOURING
WITCH



Seven types of ambiguity

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research



ABOVE: Did someone hack Dr Pasulka's Twitter account to post some very odd messages? And if so, why?

ASK FOR HAIG

Back in the day, I had the good fortune to help crew various sizes of ship sailing in and out of various harbours on the Solent: Poole, Christchurch, the Hamble, Buckler's Hard, Lymington, Cowes, etc. Many boats there, little and large, sported letters and/or numbers on the mainsail, denoting what class of sailing craft they belonged to. One of the more impressive of these belonged to the Haig family, producers of Haig Gold Label whisky and the distinctive 'Dimple' ('Pinch' in the USA) brands. The company's slogan had long been DON'T BE VAGUE, ASK FOR HAIG, and whether the nautical part of the family had a snooty view of all these little dinghies and their modestly inscribed sails, or just had a certain satirical sense of things, I don't know, but *their* mighty mainsail announced in huge black letters DON'T BE VAGUE. So we all knew what line that ship belonged to.

DON'T BE VAGUE ought to be writ large, framed, and hung in view of every ufologist's office chair. Top of the list of vaguenesses is the habit of making large claims with no evidence worth talking about: foatales feature in this category, along with many a hoaxtale, and probably the majority of abduction lore. Dr Jacques Vallée has long been a candidate for the Haig Prize, which I'm tempted to make an annual award (trophy: one empty Dimple bottle), what with his fuzzy notion of UFOs as a 'control system' that he can't quite explain, and unsubstantiated, not to say illogical, idea that crop circles are the result of secret beam-weapon tests. Now he's come up with a very large claim, in *Forbidden Science* (Vol. Four, 2019) that he's seen documentation confirming that the CIA "simulated UFO abductions in Latin America (Brazil and Argentina) as psychological warfare experiments." Such seminal events

as the Villas-Boas story come to mind. But, asked by the UFO Trail's Jack Brewer for more details, Vallée fudged. Habit of a lifetime? "Most of the documents I have referred to, or used in the compilation of my diaries, have been donated to a University with a 10-year embargo on access – specifically to avoid the kind of spurious quarrels that erupt in ufology on a regular basis. So I expect that historical details like these will see the light of day in due course." Pick the bones out of that, if you can find any. Are these papers embargoed even to *him*? No wonder people don't take Vallée seriously.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU TWEET FOR

Next up for a vagueness award, inattention division, is Dr Diana Walsh Pasulka, author of a book called *American Cosmic*, which ties ufology to religion. Early-ish in January she apparently posted a series of somewhat eccentric tweets. One claimed that US presidents are obliged to stand on the same spot (not named) and gaze at the Moon at least once during their term. And there are pictures of six of them supposedly doing just that. One's captioned 'National Rituals'. One senses the word 'pagan' is being implied. Another tweet laid into Tom DeLonge, who "hired a person to write his books om [sic] this topic. I researched and wrote my own. He is a mason. I am a Jewish-Irish genocide survivor. I have a lot to lose, TDL does not. I know all of his scientists. They are defecting. And they should." There are others, no less logically garbled. One claims DeLonge and TTSAAS (To the Stars Academy of Arts & Science) is a US Government 'psyop'.

A few days after this, Prof Pasulka put out a statement saying that her social media accounts had been hacked and was "mortified" by what the impostor had said

in her name. Yet at the same time she said: "Some things were actually things in my email, but nothing I would say publicly." While the rest of us were wondering what that might actually mean, Jack Brewer checked her further claim that she had reported the hacking to the police. He made enquiry of the University of North Carolina Wilmington (where Dr Pasulka is a faculty member) Police Department, the Wilmington Police Department, and the New Hanover County Sheriff's office. None had any record of any complaint from the Professor. Brewer concluded his 6 February UFO Trail blog report: "Dr Walsh Pasulka was emailed and informed the three law enforcement agencies responded that no records were located pertaining to the Jan 10 incidents. She was asked the names of the agencies to which she reported the circumstances. She was also offered an opportunity to comment for this blog post. Pasulka did not immediately respond."

Like Dr Vallée, one can but suppose that "historical details like these will see the light of day in due course." Meanwhile, should you use social media, perhaps it's a good idea to check your account occasionally just to see what others are saying on your behalf...

BUT I READ IT IN THE PAPERS!

The dawn of Monday 27 January saw various pillars of the mainstream print media announcing that the "RAF's secret 'X-files' of reported UFO sightings in British skies are to be placed online for the first time". Not so, says Dr David Clarke (<https://drdavidclarke.co.uk/2020/01/29/the-truth-in-not-in-here/>). And he ought to know. What's involved are reports of UFOs received by the MoD since November 2009, when the Ministry's UFO desk was shut down. These are raw reports, uninvestigated, with no insiders' insights, they're not secret, and it's not the first time such stuff has gone online. They're being released in response to an FoIA request by the Press Association. No doubt some of them may be very interesting, for diligent searchers and the professionally imaginative. But there is a story lurking here. As Dr Clarke explains, "missing from these so-called 'X-files' is any content that reveals how the MoD and RAF respond to reports of unidentified aerial phenomena reported by military personnel and air defence radar stations. This material, if it exists, has now been removed from the reach of the Freedom of Information Act. If there are any real journalists out there, this is where you should be looking for a story."



Which craft?

JENNY RANDLES traces chains of coincidence through her life – is there a ufological lesson here?

If my mother had been in labour for a few hours more I would have been born at the witching hour on Hallowe'en. Given the path my life took it would have been appropriate. However, it was not just *when* I was born: the hospital where I entered the world was in sight of Pendle Hill, Lancashire, possibly the most supernatural spot in the British Isles. These were the first of many coincidences causing me to suspect synchronicity might underscore the UFO experience. My home valley was even nicknamed 'UFO Alley' when I spent school holidays back in Stacksteads with grandparents. A sculpture today sits near the hospital that even looks like a UFO. So it feels as if something nudged me subconsciously in a certain direction – especially as gran displayed 'powers' that might once have seen her tried as a Pendle witch (most likely a heightened form of instinct, not magic). Such things drove my childhood curiosity towards the unusual.

In August 1963, on holiday with gran by a pier in Blackpool, strange lights appeared over our boarding house. Four years later, a relative was working at the valley's small Bacup police station when a UFO was seen overhead and radio communications went gaga. Then, in 1980, my cousin and childhood babysitter's husband was a police sergeant at another small station four miles over the moors at Todmorden and needed my help as one of his officers had encountered a UFO above Burnley Road. The officer was Alan Godfrey, and those moors feature on TV in *Happy Valley* – a hit police drama filmed round Todmorden and created by Sally Wainwright. Sally previously created *Jane Hall*, a series about a female bus driver for which my brother helped with the design of a bus. He is now retired but his son has continued that role. The long-running X 43 route operated by Burnley Bus is one I rode regularly across the valley in the 1960s and my uncle drove around Pendle. More recently, my nephew worked on the banner naming the route the 'Witch Way' and featuring a Pendle witch on a broomstick, with each bus named after one of the accused in the 17th century trials.

Since his 1980 close encounter I have written two books with Alan Godfrey – who, before becoming a Todmorden police officer, was, like my uncle and Jane Hall, a bus driver. The only other direct witness to the object on Burnley Road was also a bus driver. Sceptics even argue the UFO was a misperception of a bus (which was, by coincidence, one that Alan himself had

previously driven).

But if that long chain of coincidence is not enough to infer 'witchcraft', there is more. My cousin's married surname, and so Alan's sergeant's that night in 1980, was Hartley. Just weeks before Alan's sighting the BBC launched a new series about a police officer running a small station in a fictional town in the Pennines: *Juliet Bravo*. An early episode was screened the day of Alan's sighting; the show even referred to its Pennine town being a UFO hotspot in its plot. Spookily, the BBC chose the very police station in Bacup where my relative had worked during that 1967 sighting to become the *Juliet Bravo* station. They filmed most episodes in Bacup, Stacksteads and Todmorden. The fictional town in the series was named Hartley – my cousin and Alan Godfrey's sergeant's surname. All coincidence, of course...

Yet Pendle Hill itself has more links to offer as it broods over the Lancashire landscape. In March 1612 a series of events began here that saw nine women and two men condemned to death as witches. The stories that led to these convictions began with a pedlar suddenly falling unconscious, mirroring what happened to Alan Godfrey three centuries later. Though presumed to have suffered a stroke, the man recovered, but blamed a woman walking with him for casting a 'curse'. Rumours grew into claims that cows were bewitched – and PC Godfrey was looking for a missing herd at that spot on Burnley Road when he saw the UFO; after the sighting, he found them relocated across a river next to where the UFO had been.

Other stories were likely exaggerated in 1612 to 'prove' witchcraft. They included strange lights and weird creatures; 368 years on, these would be interpreted quite differently. Indeed, in an episode of *Doctor Who* transmitted the weekend of the 38th anniversary of Alan Godfrey's sighting, the Doctor visited this part of Lancashire in 1612 and got charged with witchcraft. Then, a few episodes later, she was informed by the Master that he kept tabs on alien activity by reading *Fortean Times* every month!

Pendle Hill featured in a classic UFO case on 9 March 1977, when two night-workers saw a mass of multicoloured lights coming towards them. Their car engine and lights failed. Both men suffered lasting effects, much like those 'cursed by witches'. Hair stood on end, skin tingled, eyes burned and they became unwell. Easy to see how this would have been interpreted in 1612.

A remarkably similar object was seen

between Bacup and Todmorden (on a road used in filming for *Juliet Bravo*). A woman driving late on 4 February 1988 saw a "swirling liquid or fire embers with constantly changing patterns". (Such reports continue: on 7 March 2015, police were called out again because multicoloured blobs of light were seen overhead). At the local Manchester research group we suspected an aircraft was illegally 'coasting' on a cargo run, causing some of the reports. That plane was real. We tracked it using radar. But we proved that something else was going on too, and ruled it out as the cause of Alan Godfrey's sighting. Our breakthrough came on 24 February 1979, when Mike Sacks saw a UFO from his house in Stacksteads (just yards from my gran's). We did not know one another, and he got my number from Jodrell Bank, but became so intrigued he joined our Manchester group. As a result, Mike worked with us on the Godfrey case, attending the hypnosis sessions, as even more coincidences emerged. A Blackpool security guard contacted me. He tied this case together as he saw the UFO on that same night – while working on the same pier in Blackpool where I first became interested in UFOs during that holiday with my gran. More extraordinary still, the guard was taking a break that night, reading that week's issue of *Titbits* magazine which carried an article titled "A Close Encounter with Britain's UFO girl". He had no idea who this was, but it was an interview with me. Coincidences had by now exceeded the limits of credulity.

Events in 1612 and the 1970s describe similar things but offer very different interpretations: witchcraft and UFOs. On 14 August 1914, another late-night apparition appeared over Lancashire. Like the others, it had a fuzzy glow and encircling mist and was seen around 2.30am. The presumption then was of a German attack, as WWI was days old and fear of Zeppelin raids mounting. What in 1612 was considered witchcraft in 1914 became a terrifying new military weapon, and by 1980, invading aliens. Interpretations change, but a real stimulus triggered each event and something transcends the ages. Bizarre chains of synchronicity feel like a clue pointing us to look beyond what we think people saw toward the inner lives of the people themselves. Could that be the common thread here? Perhaps instead of aliens and witches, we should probe the magic of the mind and focus on those who observe UFOs, not merely on what they think they see...

THE MYTHOS MEME

NOTES ON THE EMERGENCE OF A POST-TRUTH RELIGION, OR HOW GREAT CTHULHU ATE MY BRAIN AND MADE ME LIKE IT!

As his new Lovecraft adaptation, *Color Out of Space*, hits British screens, **RICHARD STANLEY** suggests the ascendancy of the squid-faced Cthulhu represents a psychoactive virus that has finally reached pandemic status – and wonders what the current resurgence of interest in Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos tells us about the 21st century zeitgeist...

2020 will be remembered as the year HP Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu mythos' entered the mainstream – the year the fictional squid god's ultradimensional tentacles finally penetrated every aspect of pop culture. Yet why now? What is it about our contemporary gestalt that has elevated this unlikely author into a household name and given his twisted fantasies lease over our shared unconscious? Jordan Peele's *Lovecraft Country* is about to hit our screens and *Game of Thrones* impresarios Benioff and Weiss have already thrown their hats into the arena, backing off from the *Star Wars* universe to tackle their own long-mooted Lovecraft project, this news coming hot on the heels of SpectreVision's recent announcement of a cinematic 'Lovecraft trilogy': three major new adaptations of some of the author's best-known works, spearheaded by this month's release of *Color Out of Space*. We are clearly poised on the brink of a major revival of interest in this troubling body of work, the runaway creation of an equally troubling man whose views are known to be tainted by elements of racism, fascism and misogyny. What indeed does this say about our species and the times we live in?

I have any number of Lovecraftian T-shirts in my possession and a hot pink Cthulhu badge proudly sewn on the combat jacket I have worn in my recent travels, so I can testify from first-hand experience that the pasta-faced alien deity is a known figure to children in Russia, Africa, Japan and the heartlands of the French Pyrenees, all of whom can readily identify the ubiquitous Old One by name. For some years now, we have been immersed in a rising tide of mythos merch – plush toys, pop-up



LEFT: Richard Stanley.

CTHULHU IS KNOWN TO CHILDREN IN RUSSIA, AFRICA, AND THE PYRENEES



books, board games, even Lovecraftian cookery tomes – despite the fact there is no direct corporate sponsor nor any advertising agency directing this otherworldly assault on our hearts and minds. I have little doubt we are witnessing something akin to a psychoactive virus that has finally reached pandemic

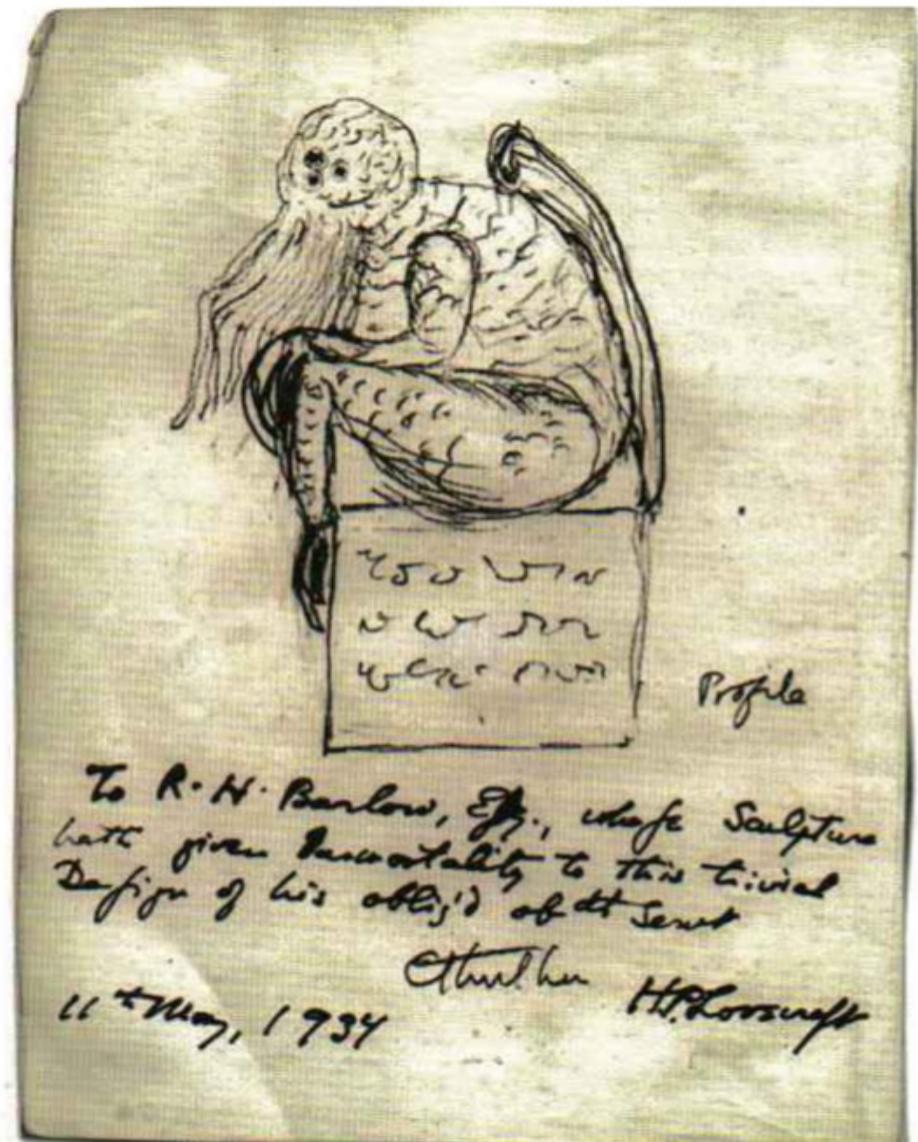
status, or what evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins termed a 'religious meme': a new idea, style, fad or form of behaviour spread through imitation and capable of evolving through natural selection in a similar manner to biological evolution. Dawkins coined the term in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* in a well-intentioned attempt to describe how ideas, ideologies and religious beliefs reproduce themselves as a viral phenomenon within our culture. As a highly vocal proponent of atheism, the good doctor would perhaps be surprised and not a little unsettled to find his theories exemplified by the manner in which Lovecraft's oddly addictive brand of cosmic supernaturalism has successfully wormed its way into the 21st century zeitgeist.

THE HERMIT OF PROVIDENCE

At the time of his death in 1937, Lovecraft's work was little known, having seen publication only in pulp magazines and amateur periodicals. Raised in Providence, Rhode

Island, by his aunts after both parents were committed to an insane asylum, the young Howard Phillips Lovecraft was slow to make friends and remained a misanthropic recluse for much of his short unhappy life, perishing at the age of 47 from untreated stomach cancer. His slender literary output, taking off at a vertiginous angle from Poe and the Gothic fantasies of the 19th century, was directly inspired by the vivid nightly dreams the young seer duly recorded in his commonplace book – the basis for a body of work that achieves a rare oneiric power, transcending both generic tropes and the author's lack of interest in conventional characterisation or even recognisable human emotions. However, while Lovecraft may have written throwaway characters, he most certainly did not write throwaway stories. In his own words: "All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that





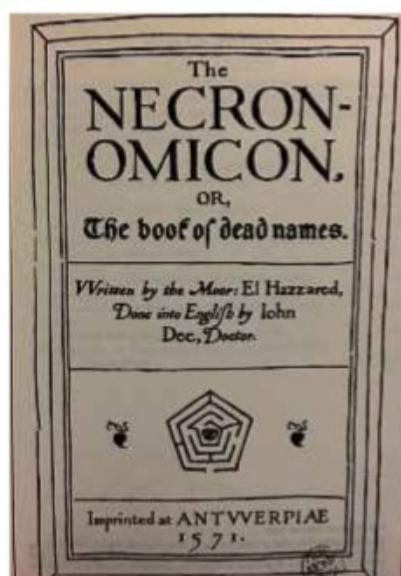
THE PICTURE ART COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: A portrait of HP Lovecraft taken in 1934. ABOVE RIGHT: A sketch of a statuette depicting Cthulhu, drawn by Lovecraft in the same year.
BELOW: One of the 'hoax' editions of the *Necronomicon*, this one "edited" by George Hay and published in 1978.

common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large." One must "forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, [have] any existence at all."

The author typically attributed his dreams to chronic indigestion and whether the cancer caused the dreams or the dreams ultimately caused the cancer is a moot point. In his mind's eye, the lonely recluse saw and effectively described a multidimensional universe inhabited by impartial alien deities that symbolised his mechanistic atheism and the vast and formless forces of chaos he believed determined the true warp and weave of our day-to-day human lives. From this hypnagogic font sprang great Cthulhu, the ultradimensional god whose tendrils made up the very coils of our waking world; and, deep in his tortured slumber, Lovecraft envisioned an imaginary book, a grand grimoire evocatively entitled the *Necronomicon*, literally the book of 'dead names', that detailed an alternative history of our world's creation, the names and characteristics of

HUMAN LAWS AND INTERESTS HAVE NO VALIDITY IN THE COSMOS-AT-LARGE



the unknown gods that apparently created it and the spells and formulæ whereby they might be conjured back into being to reclaim their rightful dominion.

The young fantasist frequently quoted from this imaginary tome as a catch-all source for the lore that underlay his tales, describing the book with such morbid authenticity that subsequent generations of casual readers and occult scholars alike assumed it

to be a genuine historic document. It was, in truth, a literary creation so potent that even if the *Necronomicon* did not exist then it soon would, willed into being by the collective imagination of the public. When correspondents asked after the book's provenance, Lovecraft playfully encouraged

them to make their own additions to his burgeoning mythos and invent their own grimoires, effectively sowing the seeds for an occult cottage industry that only came into its own long after his passing, when the woeful state of the author's legal affairs left much of his work in the public domain. It did not take long for various publishing houses to foist a seemingly endless succession of hoax '*Necronomicons*' on the public, each one serving to further blur the line between fiction and reality.

FROM THE GREAT OUTSIDE

The true model for Lovecraft's elusive grimoire was in all likelihood the *Astronomica*, a poem by the first century Roman poet Marcus Manilius that the young writer liberally quoted in an amateur astronomy column he contributed to the *Asheville Gazette-News* in 1915. Lovecraft was a precocious student and immensely well read, drawing inspiration from the Theosophists and the writings of Charles Fort (1874-1932), whose ground-breaking 1919 study of scientific anomalies *The Book of the Damned* (see FT388:46-51) clearly caught his imagination. In his 1958 article "My Correspondence with Lovecraft", Fritz Leiber reports that HPL felt Fort's books were "not to be taken seriously, though amusing enough and a great source of material for a writer of fantasy and science fiction". A passage in Fort's

magnum opus describing the mysterious ‘thunderstones’ which supposedly fell from the sky during electrical storms allegedly provided the seed for Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), the short story Lovecraft considered to be his greatest achievement and perhaps the fullest expression of his wild themes.

This classic of weird fiction concerns a meteorite from the “great outside” that strikes a remote farmstead in the backwoods of Lovecraft’s fictional Arkham County, blighting and ultimately destroying the lives of the unfortunate residents, the doomed Gardner family and their neighbours. The anomalous meteorite melts into the earth, souring the land like some Old Testament plague, malignantly afflicting first the ground water, then the crops, livestock and human inhabitants, suffusing all it touches with an indescribable otherworldly colour from beyond our spectrum. Lovecraft biographer and critic ST Joshi suggests he may have drawn this concept, at least in part, from Hugh Elliot’s *Modern*

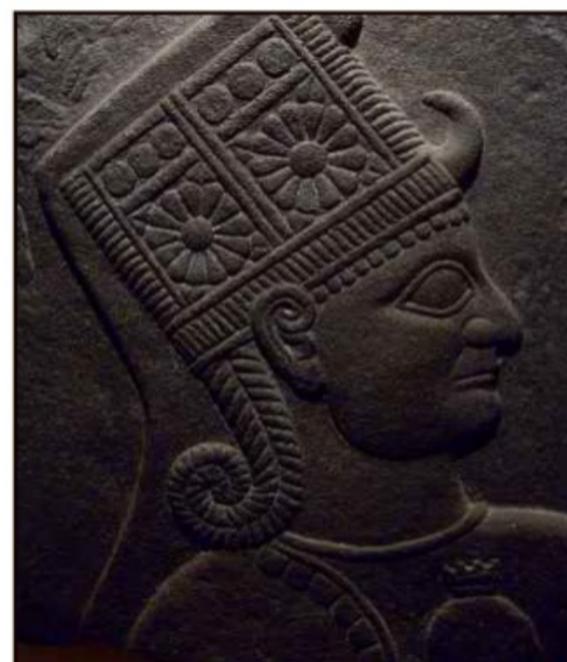
Science and Materialism (1919), a rather dry discourse that does contain a numinous passage regarding the limited nature of our human senses, in particular our inability to fully process the “æthereal waves” bearing light information – “the majority cannot be perceived by the retina at all” – an idea first deployed by the author in his short story “From Beyond” (1920). Other scholars have suggested the unearthly ‘colour out of space’ echoes the horrors of radiation contamination, with the symptoms of the fictional Gardner family matching the description in the *New York Times* of radium necrosis in their coverage of the then current ‘Radium Girls’ scandal, which detailed the travails of countless hapless factory workers fatally poisoned by the luminous paint used to manufacture watch dials in Illinois, New Jersey and Connecticut.

While great Cthulhu might be more instantly recognisable to the public, the nameless meteorite that sets in motion the cataclysmic events chronicled in “The Colour Out of Space” may be the purest expression of Lovecraft’s bleak metaphysical views. Those who subscribe to the so-called ‘panspermia theory’ (see FT277:32-37), including Fred Hoyle (1915-2001), Chandra Wickramasinghe (b. 1931) and Stephen Hawking (1942-2018), suggest that meteoric debris might have been responsible for seeding our world with organic molecules, literally the prebiotic building blocks of

The COLOUR OUT OF SPACE By H.P. Lovecraft



...and in the farrago instant of deeper darkness, the watchers saw wriggling at that treetop height, a thousand tiny points of faint and unshallow'd radiance, tipping each bough like the fire of St. Elmo... and all the while the shaft of phosphorescence from the well was getting brighter and brighter and bringing to the minds of the huddled men, a sense of doom and abnormality... It was no longer shining out; it was pouring out; and as the shapeless stream of unglossable colour left the well, it seemed to flow directly into the sky.



life, just as some future impact hundreds, thousands or millions of years from now could cauterise the Earth once more, abruptly bringing an end to all life on our planet. Like one of Lovecraft’s impartial alien deities, the meteorite does not need to be capable of any form of recognisable consciousness in order to carry out this vast act of god-like creation and negation, nor does it even need to be objectively aware of our existence.

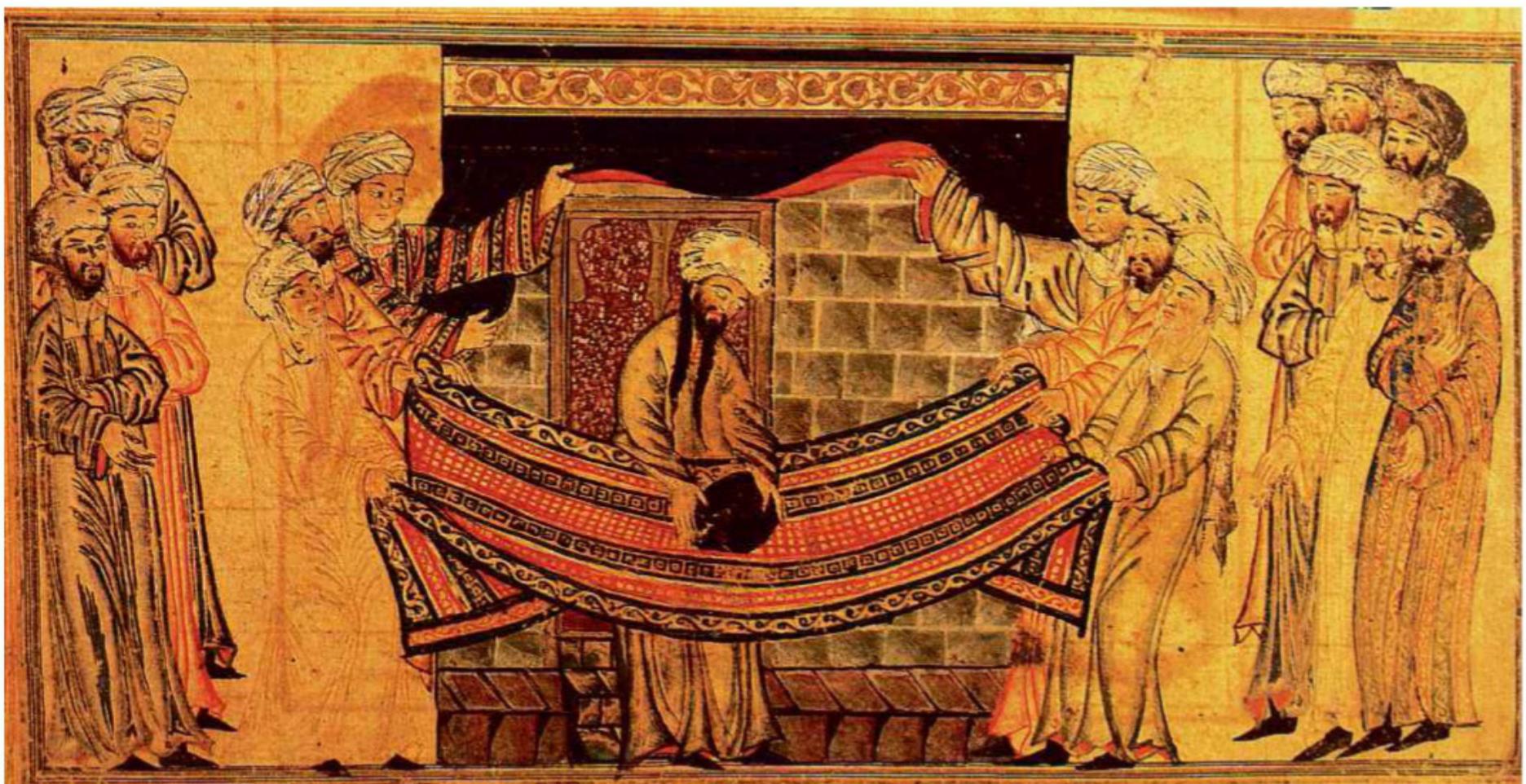
These meteoric visitors from the great outside, Fort’s ‘thunderstones’, literally lie at the very core of our religious concepts. It should come as no surprise that the Holy

LEFT: An illustration by JM de Aragon for “The Colour Out of Space” on its first appearance in *Amazing Stories*, September 1927. BELOW: A relief of Kubaba, eighth century BC.

Grail is described in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s 12th century *Parsival* as a life-giving stone from the sky, *lapsit exillis*, a hard, dark symbol of Christ’s suffering and the possibility of redemption. Long before Christ was ever a concept, before the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Black Madonna, before Kybele, Cybele, or Sybil, the great ur-mother who ruled over the hearts and souls of our Eurasian ancestors was known as Kubaba, the goddess of the caves, worshipped in grottos and on mountaintops since the dim-red dawn of creation and known to her adherents as the Magna Mater or Meter Orie, by whose name we call the unearthly black stones associated with her: meteorites – quite literally the ‘mother stones’. The ideograms for the ‘mountain mother’ in the Hittite alphabet range from a lozenge or cube, a double-headed axe, a dove, a cup, a door or a gate – all images of the goddess in Neolithic Europe. The very

name Kubaba may betoken a cave or empty vessel, a womb-space, or possibly derive from *kube* or *kuba*, recalling at once the black meteoric cube of the Ka’bah, that was brought into Islam after Mohammed (peace be upon him) routed its original idolatrous worshippers from Mecca.

Deep beneath the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount, Jerusalem is supposedly a partly flooded cavity known to Muslims as Bir-el-Arweh, or the ‘Well of Souls’, and Jewish lore maintains that when David dug the foundations of the first temple he found the Eben Shetiyah, the ‘stone of foundation’, around which God built the world – literally the block that holds back the Abyss. When he tried to move the stone, the waters of the underworld burst forth, mirroring a parallel tradition in Islam, which holds that when Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him) cast down the idol that once stood in the sacred complex at Mecca, he unblocked an ancient well beneath the Ka’bah. The idol was said to resemble the body of a ‘black woman’, a deity named ‘Hubal’ – almost certainly another mask of Kubaba or Cybele, who was known to be venerated at that time in Phrygia. In truth, a Phrygian statue of Cybele “graven from a single meteoric aerolite” (Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 1911, pp46-7) was apparently presented to Rome in 204 BC by Attalus the king of Pessinus in Asia



ABOVE: Mohammed dedicates the Black Stone in a 1315 illustration from the *Jami al-Tawarikh*. BELOW: The Black Stone seen through a portal in the Ka'bah.

Minor. This meteoric goddess became known as Mater Idaea Deum, and the ecstatic rites of her worship, while initially a little alien to the Roman temperament, seem to have caught on with the populace, who venerated her in the Phrygianum, the vast temple that once stood on the site of the present-day Vatican. The high priest who presided over those frenzied rituals was known as Papus, or father, the direct ancestor of the Pope, head of the patriarchal Holy Roman Church. As her worship spread throughout the Empire, icons made in her image proliferated, painted black not because of the skin of the Egyptians, the dark alluvial soil of the Nile, or some obscure Arabic trilateral root word as certain esoteric researchers would have us believe, but because the template on which she was based, the original statue that held sway over Rome, was fashioned from black meteoric iron. Behind the masks of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the Goddess, the Grail and the stones from the sky were one all along.

THE VIRUS SPREADS

Whether Lovecraft was fully aware of the myth complex surrounding these meteoric sacraments is somewhat unlikely, but whether he was truly a visionary, a seer, or simply an unusually gifted writer of pulp fiction, it's hard to deny a certain prophetic element to his work. There are concepts touched upon in his tales, such as the multidimensional nature of our world and references to alien, "non-Euclidean geometry", that must have baffled his contemporary readers and which can be better understood from the vantage

THE GODDESS, THE GRAIL AND THE STONES FROM THE SKY WERE ONE



point of the 21st century. I recall using the term "non-Euclidean" in a school essay penned in the mid-1970s, only to have it furiously circled in red pen by my form tutor, who was quick to inform me there was "no such thing", arguing that

all geometry is inherently Euclidean. The word 'fractal' wasn't coined until 1975 when mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot used the term to describe the concept of theoretical fractional dimensions to recurrent geometric patterns in nature, just as chaos science finally began to give us the theoretical tools to understand the vast and seemingly formless forces of creation – the very essence of what Lovecraft was driving at in his visionary prose.

Critical and mainstream acceptance of his curious contribution to American letters, however, came only slowly. Reviews of the first hardback anthologies of his stories to appear after the war were scathingly dismissive, an attitude exemplified by the foremost critic of the day, Edmund Wilson, who wrote in a 1945 edition of the *New Yorker*: "The only real horror in most of these fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art." Avram Davidson, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, was more to the point, dismissing the hermit of Rhode Island with a single slash of his pen: "In short, Howard (Phillips Lovecraft) was a twitch, boys and girls, and that's all there is to it... Lovecraft was as nutty as a five-dollar fruit-cake." The British writer and critic Colin Wilson came closer to the quick in his 1962 analysis *The Strength to Dream: Literature and the Imagination*, in which he compares Lovecraft to the Düsseldorf Strangler, writing: "In some ways Lovecraft is a horrifying figure. In his 'war with rationality' he brings to mind WB Yeats. But unlike Yeats, he is sick... Lovecraft is totally withdrawn, he has rejected 'reality'; he seems to have lost all sense of health that would make a normal man turn back

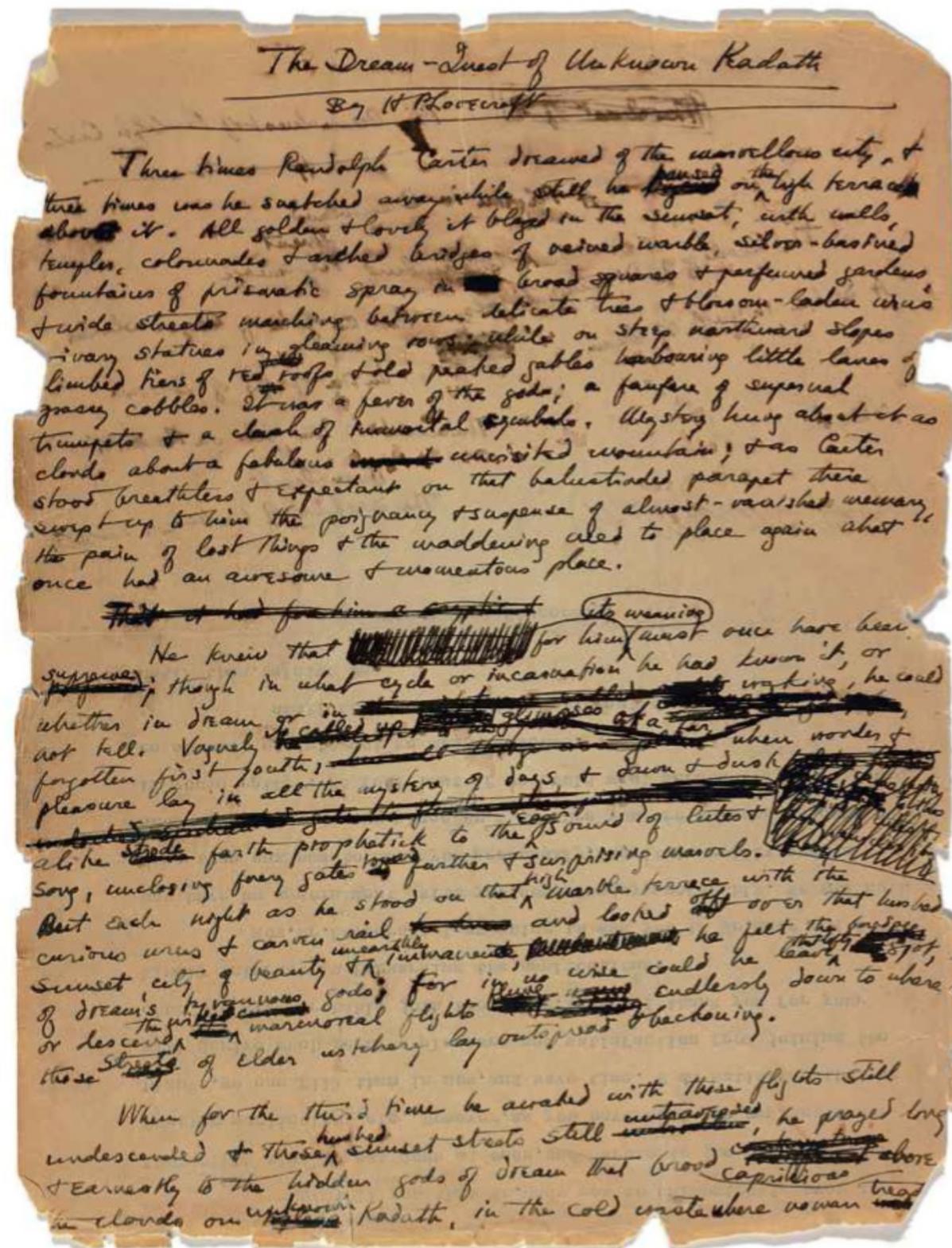
RIGHT: The first page of Lovecraft's original manuscript of "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath", written between 1926 and 1927.

halfway... but although Lovecraft is such a bad writer, he has something of the same kind of importance as Kafka. If his work fails as literature, it still holds an interest as a psychological case history. Here was a man who made no attempt whatever to come to terms with life..."

If Lovecraft failed at life and literature, then he succeeded in introducing a surprisingly potent metafictional meme to contemporary culture, a metaphysical virus that continues to proliferate across every platform of our media. His books were widely reprinted in paperback from the Sixties onwards, reaching a new audience primed by the psychedelic revolution.

Early cinematic adaptations of Lovecraft's work were, perhaps unsurprisingly, a mixed bag. Entries such as *The Haunted Palace* (a loose 1963 take on "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" starring Vincent Price) and *Die, Monster Die* (an equally loose 1965 adaptation of "The Colour Out of Space" headlined by an elderly Boris Karloff) stripped the material of much of its mood, mad science and any deeper philosophical meditations, attempting to reposition the stories within the creaky matrix of the then current Poe franchise, a 19th-century model that Lovecraft had wholly rejected. Later entries, notably the work of director Stewart Gordon (*Reanimator* (1985), *From Beyond* (1986), *Dagon* (2001) et al) were more successful in broadening the reach of the mythos, which by the 1980s embraced a widening slew of comic books, role-playing games and black metal albums. Perhaps as a natural human reaction to the sheer bleakness of Lovecraft's cosmic nihilism, subsequent generations responded by turning the Old Ones into toys, the subject of jocular Christmas carols, cartoons and fridge magnets, reducing the inexpressible to something they could at least get a handle on. By the end of the century, the critical community seemed on the verge of inducting his work into the pantheon of American literature, with Lovecraft's stories frequently surfacing as recommended reading on high school syllabi.

As growing scholarly interest cast a sharper light upon the unfortunate circumstances of Lovecraft's life, racist comments made in his private correspondence came to light, provoking further controversy. The author's execrable and wholly uninformed socio-political opinions, a further manifestation of his reclusive nature, his mistrust and outright hatred of humanity, indeed of life itself, must surely be taken into account when addressing and appraising his work; yet in some respects Lovecraft's vitriolic views



only serve to make the material more challenging, a stumbling block to common sense, human dignity and conventional criticism.

In 2010 the World Fantasy Awards were forced to remove Lovecraft's caricatured bust from their trophies in tacit acknowledgement of his unsavoury socio-political sympathies. Yet despite these growing misgivings and the philosophical difficulties presented by the primary texts, the mythos meme continued to spread unchecked. Writing in a 2017 paper on the persistence of Lovecraftian racial narratives in contemporary politics, the publisher and literary critic Wes House eloquently summed up the conundrum presented by the author's continued popularity: "...to divorce his racism from his literary creations would be a pyrrhic victory; what results is a whitewashed portrait of a profound writer. And from a criticism standpoint, what's lost is any meaningful grappling with the connection between Lovecraft's racism and the cosmic anti-humanism that defined his horror."

DREAM QUESTS

I was indoctrinated into Lovecraft's weird world as a child, growing up in apartheid-era South Africa. My mother, Penny, was an artist, anthropologist and illustrator who counted the cranky hermit of Rhode Island among her favourite authors, introducing me to his work as bedside reading. I first encountered "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" (1926) as a seven-year-old; nor did it seem inappropriate, given that much of Lovecraft's lighter Dunsanian fiction is well suited to younger readers, serving as a sort of gateway drug to the mythos. By the time I was 13 and old enough to wield a camera, I already had a decent working knowledge of the primary texts and had begun to idly consider the challenge of adapting "The Colour Out of Space" into a feature film. To some extent "Colour" is the low-hanging fruit of the canon, set in rural farm country rather than at the bottom of the Mariana Trench or on some other world light years from our own, effectively making it more approachable for a young film maker working on a



ABOVE: Nathan Gardner finds the familiar world changing around him after a meteorite falls on his land in Richard Stanley's *Color Out of Space*. BELOW: The film introduces a human element missing from Lovecraft's original story in the shape of Nathan (Nicolas Cage) and Theresa Gardner (Joely Richardson) and their family.

shoestring. I tried to imagine what would happen if it were my own family confronting the implacable cosmic horrors that engulf the Gardner clan and how it would feel to know there was nothing I could do to save them. Later, when my mother lay dying after a 10-year battle with lymphoma, I read to her from the "Dream Quest", just as she had read to me years before, and was forced to observe how the cancer had changed her, ravaging her psychologically as well as physically, playing havoc with her psyche and the hearts and minds of all who came into contact with her. In her final months my two older sisters could no longer bear to speak to her or even look at her. My mother had never been conventionally religious and somehow the only things that could reach her at the very last were Lovecraft's words; moreover, despite the darkness of his vision she clearly took no small comfort from his mythos. When she lost the use of her swallow mechanism and her ability to take solid food I decided not to place her on a feeding tube or to make further attempts to hydrate her, other than wetting her lips from time to time. Effectively, I allowed her to starve to death, a process the nurses in the care unit told me would take approximately three days before she slipped into a terminal coma. Being an unusually strong woman however it took my mother seven days and seven nights to relinquish her grip on life; and during that time, I was forced to keep watch, shifting my chair slowly closer to her bed as I revisited the essential weird tales that had haunted me



since childhood, reading the texts aloud to cover up the shrieks, cries and whimpers that rose incessantly from the other rooms on the ward. When you stay around the clock in a terminal ward for any extended period you get to see and hear things that regular family members are mercifully spared during daylit visiting hours. During that long, dark, terrible vigil the screenplay for "Colour" began to finally take shape in my mind, although I did not start work on the text until my mother had breathed her last and I had lifted her from her bed, placed

her securely in her coffin and screwed down the lid.

We all have our grieving processes and I suppose this was mine. The resulting screenplay, penned with my writing partner Scarlett Amaris, sought to re-invest the mythos with the primal, existential terror that was its due. The completed draft floated around Hollywood for a couple years, finding no takers, largely because of the sheer darkness of the material. Actors and their agents tend to look for parts that display sympathetic traits, positive learning experiences, emotional growth and heroic dramatic arcs – but the only way out for characters in a Lovecraft story are death and insanity; nor could this nightmarish scenario ever conform to the conventional 'save the cat' structure currently favoured by modish screenwriters. Rather than betray the source material, I allowed the project to languish, waiting until the stars were right, not knowing that day would ever come.

THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE

Perhaps Uranie, the grizzled bush shaman who lived off the grid as a hermit in a cottage he had built by hand at the base of the Rennes plateau near my home in the French Pyrenees was the first to sense the time had come. He was possibly the only individual I have ever met who actually believed in Lovecraft's Old Ones, basing much of his magic on a battered French language edition of yet another hoax Necronomicon – this one the handiwork of George Hay and Colin Wilson, who had

graduated from criticising Lovecraft to actively pastiching his style. Uranie, a former electrician from Bordeaux who dropped out of the so-called ‘real’ world to pursue his vocation as a sorcerer, believed the ultradimensional deities described in the dog-eared paperback were possibly more real than he was and faithfully placated them in an elaborate cycle of seasonal rituals, and in the 30 years that I counted him as a friend I didn’t have the heart to disavow him of his views by pointing out their fictional origins. A sincere belief, they say, will make it so – and so it was.

Three summers after my mother’s passing Uranie performed a powerful invocation to Yog Sothoth, the ‘guardian’ and ‘keeper of the gate’ according to “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), the yarn whence this fictive deity was drawn. As Uranie spoke the words, the wind began to rise, bringing with it a squall of warm rain, a violent summer storm breaking with exquisite timing around the crag where we had gathered for this surreal occasion. Clenching his staff more tightly in his jaundiced hands, the little shaman turned his eyes skyward as lightning abruptly flickered overhead, his long grey hair billowing in the tempest as he implored Lovecraft’s gods to bring the long-delayed production of *Color Out of Space* into manifestation. Of course, I didn’t believe the Old Ones were listening and at the time it was all I could do to keep a straight face and not laugh aloud at the sheer insanity of the spectacle.

I still didn’t believe it when I received a telephone call at two in the morning at my home in France from some guy in a bar in Nevada claiming he was Nicolas Cage and that he apparently cherished my screenplay and wanted to play the lead role of the family patriarch, Nathan Gardner. I listened to what he had to say before hanging up and going outside to sit with my cat and have a smoke, counting the shooting stars before dawn. It seemed too far-fetched to be true, nor did I fully believe the project was moving forward until the US producer Josh C Waller and one of his Portuguese partners drove all the way to my headquarters in the mountains, negotiating the col just before dawn to bang on my front door. I fixed them a coffee and they told me to get in the car. It was only as we drove south that I slowly began to realise we were actually making the movie and had six weeks to prep the beast and then another six to get it in the can. Being the dead heart of midwinter, the second week of December 2018, most of Europe and the US were under snow, forcing us to shoot in Sintra, Portugal, the most southwesterly tip of the continent, where there were still leaves on the trees and I might have some hope of reproducing Massachusetts at harvest time, the approximate setting of the story.

My collaboration with Mr Cage turned out to be every bit as enjoyable and



ABOVE: Tommy Chong as Ezra, the film’s version of the late Uranie, an electrician-turned-shaman who once invoked Yog Sothoth.

the United States, officially becoming a box office phenomenon and giving the mythos meme renewed impetus. A slew of imitations, as well as two official sequels, have already been announced.

Sadly, Uranie did not live to see his invocation bear fruit. He passed shortly before production commenced, the official cause put down to liver failure brought on by 30 years of untreated Hepatitis C. In the completed film his character, here called Ezra, is played by Tommy Chong. Whether his life was the price Yog Sothoth demanded, only the Old Ones know.

Cultural commentators and social anthropologists are still trying to get their heads around the concept of a shared creative universe – yet against all odds, writing in the early years of the 20th century, Lovecraft accomplished something that goes beyond the much-touted achievements of the recent Marvel movies and their imitators. He initiated an ever-mutating, ever-expanding shared universe that exists utterly beyond copyright or corporate control: a self-perpetuating mythos in which the readers and viewers are themselves invited to actively participate. Given the protean entity’s fictional origins, Cthulhu can never be discredited – nor exposed as a paedophile or sexual predator like any other earthly saint, spiritual guide or guru – making his tentacled presence an ideal deity for a post-truth era in which our very environment is seemingly turning against us. I suspect in two or three centuries from now, should humanity survive so long, the *Necronomicon* and Lovecraft’s Old Ones will still be with us, whereas a great many other contemporary religious movements (Scientology, TM, ISIS, Christian Identity, you name it) will have happily faded from memory.

Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn!

COLOR OUT OF SPACE starring Nicolas Cage, Joely Richardson, Madeleine Arthur and Tommy Chong will be on UK release from 28 February.

For more on HP Lovecraft, see also Daniel Harms, “Dreamer of the Dark”, FT184:32-40; Roger Luckhurst, “Lovecraft Resurgent”, FT304:54-55; David Hambling, “File under ‘science fiction’”, FT304:56-57; and James Holloway, “HP Lovecraft and the Horror of History”, FT369:32-39.

◆ **RICHARD STANLEY** is the director of *Hardware* (1990), *Dust Devil* (1992) and a number of short films and documentaries. He has written previously for FT on topics that include *Haitian vodou* and *Otto Rahn*.

On its opening weekend, *Color Out of Space* drew a higher per-screen average than any other film currently playing in

ONE MAN'S TRASH

THE EPHEMERAL OBSESSONS OF JOHN TOWNSEND

For almost 70 years, John Townsend amassed an extraordinary collection of 20th century ephemera that has now inspired a new book, *Wrappers Delight*. **BOB FISCHER** carefully unwraps the story of one man's overriding obsession, then puts the packaging to one side for safekeeping...

He was collecting on a different level," says Jonny Trunk. "Relentless. Absolutely relentless. It's so hardcore." This is quite something coming from Jonny, an irrepressible gatherer of vintage curiosities himself. His label, Trunk Records, has become the stuff of legend, breathing new life into musical obscurities of the mid-20th century. But his new book, *Wrappers Delight*, (see FT389:66) shines a spotlight on one of the most prolific collectors of British ephemera ever to have lived. The late John Townsend lived in the suburbs of Stockport, dedicating his entire life to a house-filling (and, indeed, shed-, caravan- and summerhouse-filling) collection of cards, stickers, wrappers, packaging, tins, junk mail... pretty much *anything* that ordinary households would routinely throw away.

The story of the book began with promotional flexi-discs. A friend of John Townsend's son Robin borrowed a boxful from the house, and uploaded an audio mix of them onto YouTube, before alerting Jonny Trunk, who has a profound interest in such matters. "There was the Barbara Moore Singers doing a Tango advert; there was a Bryant & May 'Message from the Chairman', that sort of thing," remembers Jonny. "Just my sort of advertising rubbish! I went up and offered Robin a good sum of money for the box, and I said 'Let's have a look around the house'. And from there..."

He pauses.

"It was an Aladdin's Cave. Hanging in the hall was a Weetabix T-shirt, and I thought 'What?! Why is there a Weetabix T-shirt there?' It was the one where they turned the Weetabix into little skinheads, remember that? And on every shelf there was a *thing*, a tin can that was a promotional item that had been turned into a radio... wherever you looked there was *something*. He had loads of mugs, and I love mugs. And they were *everywhere*... mugs from Robertson's Jam or the Swizzles factory.

"There were bags, and in the bags were boxes, and in the boxes were more bags, and in the bags was more stuff. I'm a collector,

FUEL PUBLISHING



THE HOUSE IS A RIOT OF EPHEMERA, A MUSEUM OF 20TH CENTURY PACKAGING



LEFT: John Townsend in the early 1980s.

BELOW: "A lot of it was about him taking control of his life" – the 1940s milk bottle tops that started the collection.

and I know how much time, energy and effort it's taken to collect the roomful of records I've got. And he did it with postcards, cigarette cards, tobacco silks, first day covers... everything. What most people spend their life doing for *one* thing, he did across several. I got really excited by the possibilities."

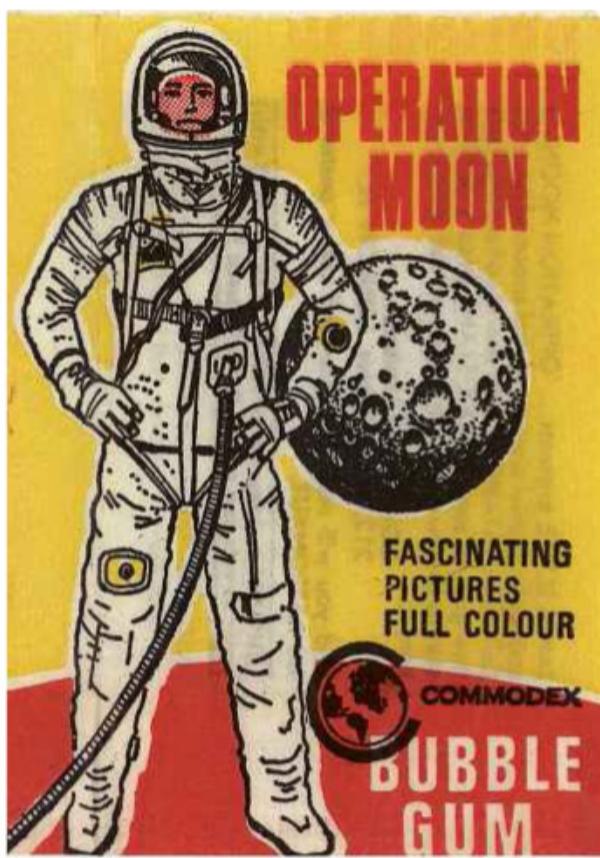
The book is a sumptuous affair, with 500 of John Townsend's most vividly evocative items scanned and photographed in loving detail. From *Pink Panther* candy to *Yellow Submarine* sweet cigarettes, from Lolly Gobble Choc Bombs to Kung Fuey crisps, they provide a direct portal to an era when luridly packaged treats would be eagerly snaffled by grubby-faced kids all over the country, queuing in pokey sweetshops and street corner newsagents alike.

THE DISPOSABLE LIFE

Three days after speaking with Jonny Trunk, I travel to Stockport to visit the Townsend household itself, finding myself at the door of an impressive, five-bedroomed house in a leafy cul-de-sac: the very epitome of unassuming suburbia. I'm greeted by Robin, a whiskery blues musician now known universally as Robin Sunflower ("It was chosen for me by the people of Ashton-under-Lyne," he says enigmatically). His wife Paula is also there, as are two incredibly excited dogs, one of whom is called Elvis.

Immediately, I get a sense of what Jonny has described as a "strange energy"; John Townsend's collection, although depleted since his death in 2014, still dominates every available space. The house is a riot of ephemera, a museum of 20th century pop culture and packaging that is still piled halfway to the ceiling in some rooms. As we settle down by the fireside, Robin begins to tell me his father's life story.

"He was born in Surrey in 1937," he says. "His dad died quite young, and his mum



BELOW: Could It Be Forever... Robin uncovers David Cassidy and Jimmy Osmond among the 1970s pop stickers.

got another man, so he ended up going into a children's home. And he spotted that the milk that was delivered there every day had different patterns on the cardboard bottle tops. And he started collecting them. It was something that he could have, something that made him different to everybody else. And from there he went onto collecting cigarette cards, tea cards... and then anything."

"He had an eye for design, and logos," adds Paula. "They would have appealed to him."

"Yeah," agrees Robin. "Logos fascinated him. So he went from cigarette cards, to bubble gum cards, and then the actual packaging. Everything that came into the house was planned. It wasn't just a case of 'We need some beans, we need some Cornflakes.' He'd be in the shop, and he'd say: 'We're going to get *these* beans, because they're advertising *this* film...'"

John moved from Surrey to Stockport in the late 1950s, and into the current house in the early 1970s. He spent his entire working life as a rep for Bird's Eye ("We were never short of frozen peas," deadpans Paula), weaving his love of collecting into his regular family life, with wife Brenda and three young sons – Martin, Robin, and Christopher.

"Me and my older brother Martin were very much employed, at not fantastic rates!" laughs Robin. "My dad would regularly come back with boxes of bubble gum – 144 packets in each box. And in each packet there'd be one piece of bubble gum and four or five cards of whatever series it was; footballers or pop stars. We would flatten all the wrappers, then get all the cards and put them into order, onto boards. There's number 7 from *that* series, and there's number 22..." What comes over strongly is that John's hobby wasn't merely collecting for collecting's sake: he felt an overpowering duty to preserve the minutiae of 20th century life for future generations to enjoy, and

had a visionary sense that eventually these throwaway items would attain great cultural importance, simply because most households were throwing them away.

"There was definitely a social history angle," nods Robin.

Paula agrees. "Everything to do with disposable life fascinated him," she says. "He was always going on about the throwaway society, and how it was wrong and he should keep everything. And how one day it was all going to be in this glorious museum. He never got round to that... he never gave himself time, because he was always just collecting more and more."

"People would bring him things as well," adds Robin. "He'd say 'Please collect all your empty cereal boxes and bring them to me... all your junk mail, all your phone cards, all your bus and train tickets...'"

And some of John's collection has accrued

remarkable value.

"There were two boxes full of flattened cereal packets, mostly from the 1970s," says Robin. "I looked through, and said 'This one's

got Star Wars on it'. So we put two Star Wars Shreddies boxes onto eBay with a starting bid of a fiver. Someone got in touch, and asked 'Would you take £300 for the two?' It was like... right, OK... let's tread a bit more carefully now. We've also got Battlestar Galactica, Superman, The Black Hole..."

"And the Doctor Who Weetabix boxes, we just couldn't believe. One bloke bought three of the four, on the same day. He spent over £1,000 on three empty Weetabix boxes."

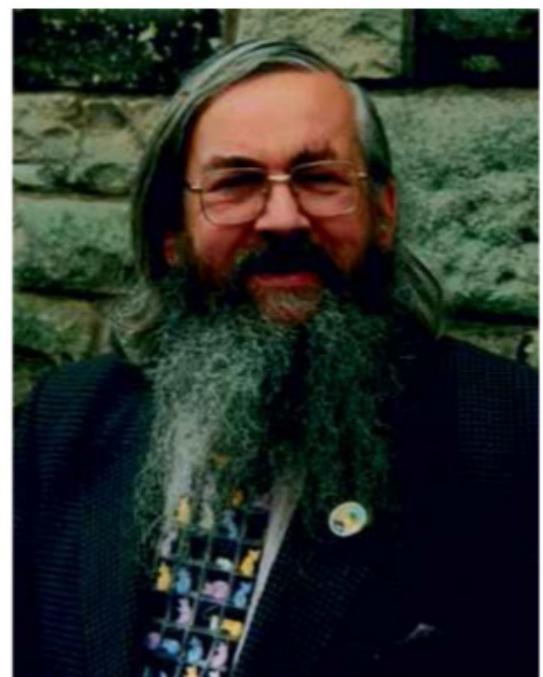
So objects that were designed to be collectable are now worth less than the packaging that housed them, simply because people kept the former, but not the latter?" "Yeah," nods Robin. "People might have kept the little plastic figures or the cards, but not



ANDREW T SMITH



ANDREW T SMITH



ROBIN SUNFLOWER

ABOVE LEFT: Robin flicks through some of his father's collection. ABOVE RIGHT: John Townsend in 1999.

the box. That's the nature of ephemera." "Your dad knew that all along," says Paula. "He understood that immediately."

THE HOUSE OF M.I.C.E

The presence of John's wife Brenda seems to have tempered the scale of the collection, but the intensity of his hobby escalated following her death in 1989. "It was different when Mum was alive," agrees Robin. "There were certain areas where his collection was, and certain areas where it wasn't. But once there was only him, there was no need for any demarcation lines."

This change in circumstances led John's fascination with printed matter into some unexpected new territories, too: notably, a notorious Manchester nightclub whose name became synonymous with 1990s rave culture. "Haçienda club flyers," says Paula. "He loved those."

Robin nods. "He used to go into Manchester with a rucksack, a shopping trolley and a couple of shoulder bags, and he would go round Affleck's Palace and Eastern Bloc Records, picking up huge stacks of them. His bag would weigh a ton!" This new direction prompted John to put his collecting on a more formal footing, with

"YOU'D HEAR A SORT OF A RUMBLE UPSTAIRS AS SOMETHING COLLAPSED..."

the foundation of an official society. "He was running a club called the M.I.C.E. club," explains Robin. "All about club flyers, tourist information cards, free postcards... things that were given away as promotional items."

At this point, he retrieves from the shelf a book that gives an indication of the level of attention that John's collection began to attract. *The Ultimate Guide To Unusual Leisure*, by Stephen Jarvis, was published by Robson Books in 1997. It includes an entry on M.I.C.E, the "Modern Information Collectors Exchange", founded by John to swap promotional flyers with similar enthusiasts dotted around the country. "What would life be like if you saved every piece of

junk mail?" the book speculates. "Probably like John Townsend's life, who has boxfuls of the stuff all over the house. It's even on the staircase. He says: 'There's a gap down the middle of the hall, where I walk...'"

Robin closes the book, proudly. "It's also got entries on Zen Archery, the Friends of the Museum of Bad Art, The Flying Nun Fan Club, and barbed wire collecting."

"I'm surprised your dad didn't get into that," smiles Paula.

So did the collection take over the house as spectacularly as the book suggests?

"It was quite extreme at one point," says Paula. "You could sort of shuffle around, but you had to do it really slowly. Sometimes you would actually have to climb over boxes. If you lay flat, you could sort of slide over them. And I don't remember going upstairs for the first few years. I don't think it was accessible upstairs."

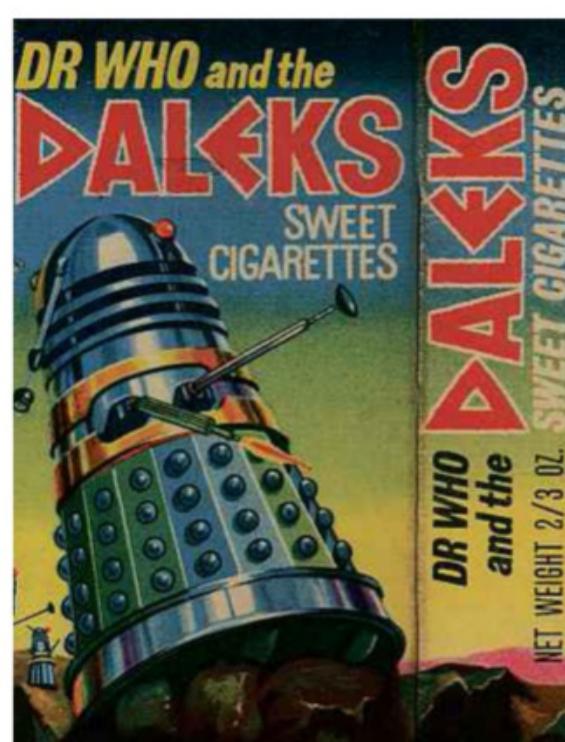
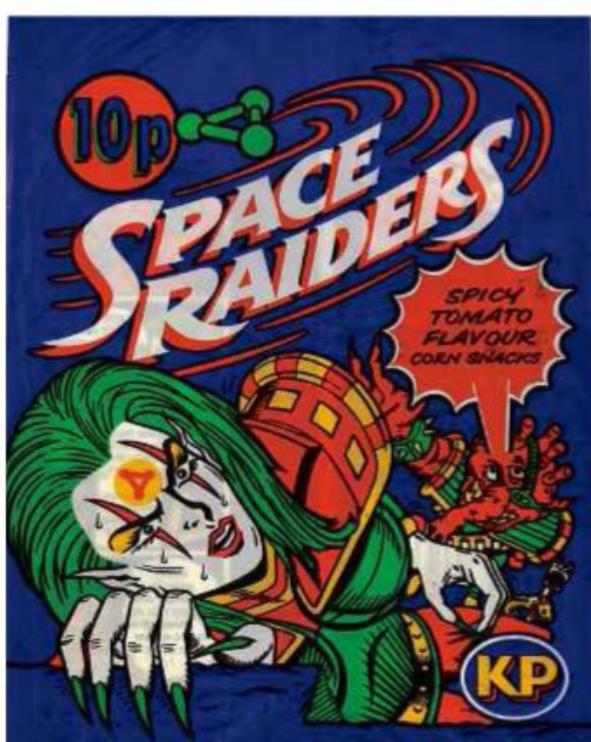
"Sometimes you'd hear a sort of rumble upstairs, as something collapsed," remembers Robin, wistfully.

"But there was never any shame over it," adds Paula. "He was always 'Take me as you find me, this is how I want to live'. And everybody accepted that, because it was just... John."

Both Robin and Paula recall John's sense of humour and gregarious nature, describing a funny and sociable man who was entirely aware of his own idiosyncrasies. "He liked the thought of being the eccentric English gent," nods Paula. "He loved being the centre of attention, and if he got the opportunity to be on the radio or the telly, then he loved that, too."

And the dawn of the 21st century provided the opportunity for John to expand his collecting habits even further. Perhaps not surprisingly, he was an enthusiastic early adopter of eBay.

"He had his own van that the Post Office would send out specifically to come here," recalls Paula. "Nowhere else. A massive box of condiments, free sachets of brown sauce, turned up one day. We said 'Why have you bought this?' He said 'Because I'm collecting





ANDREW T SMITH

ABOVE: Robin and Paula... and friends, January 2020. Cardboard boxes containing the ashes of John and Brenda Townsend are visible beneath the toy cat.

free giveaway condiments, obviously? He never used them, they just sat there for years in the box, then got totally moused."

Robin laughs. "He ran a M.I.C.E club, and then some *real* mice joined..."

"The kitchen was really scary," laughs Paula. "Remember that big tin of Mango Purée that exploded?"

Both agree that the collection reached its peak in 2007, by which stage the house was so dominated by bags and boxes that John moved into the garden summerhouse. And shortly before his death in 2014, he was still ordering eBay items from his nursing home: they would arrive unexpectedly at the house, much to Robin and Paula's surprise.

PROPHET OF THE EPHEMERAL

The couple moved into the house when John died, and began the bittersweet task of gently dismantling the collection. As the family sift through what John once conservatively estimated to be 34,000 items, older brother Martin has been tasked with listing the more interesting items on eBay.

"It feels strange, it all going out of the house," admits Paula. "Because the house and the collection have kind of become one. And it is Robin's dad. Having had years of arguing with him, I now feel that I understand where he was coming from, and why he couldn't let it go. I thought it would be easy just to get rid of it, but it's really not. When stuff goes out of the house, it does tug at your heartstrings a

bit, because we're never going to see it again. But realistically, we can't keep hold of it."

Robin agrees. "It's a shame that he spent a lot of time gathering these things together, and now they've been fragmented. Maybe out there now, there's someone desperately trying to gather them together again..."

Wrappers Delight, of course, immortalises a corner of the collection, and cements John Townsend's visionary status: Jonny Trunk's 2019 crowdfunding campaign to finance the book reached its £20,000 goal in 36 hours, proving that the world has finally come round to John's way of thinking. We now positively delight in the disposable ephemera of decades past. And Jonny Trunk himself is rightly proud of the finished product. "On every page I'll see something I like," he says. "There's a lot of illustration which I think is really quite charming. Some of it's brilliant, and some of it's not very good at all... that slightly 'outsider' art of badly drawn pop stars, you know. But there's something on every page I'd buy."

Meanwhile, Robin and Paula are a delightful couple, and inexhaustibly welcoming. As we potter around the house, I get an overwhelming impression of their love for John, and their willingness to share and celebrate his story. Touchingly, on top of a drinks cabinet in the front room, is the modest pile of 1940s cardboard milk bottle tops that sparked the whole collection. They graciously offer them for me to inspect – the

faded remnants of a traumatic, wartime childhood. I'm overtaken by a feeling of incredible sadness.

"He lost everything when he was a kid," says Paula. "It was like everything he'd lost, he put into his collecting. I think a lot of it was about him taking control of his life."

"Yeah," agrees Robin. "Existing on his own terms."

And as we pass the foot of the staircase, John's story has one final, heart-rending twist. Posing for photographs beside a promotional cardboard cut-out of a beaming 1970s schoolboy sporting a *Superman* T-shirt and a chequered flat cap, Robin smiles. "If we stand here, my parents are in the picture, too", he says. And he points out two charcoal-grey cardboard boxes, nestling almost unnoticed beneath a fluffy, sleeping toy cat.

John Townsend has become part of his own collection. It's impossible not to conclude that it's what he would have wanted.

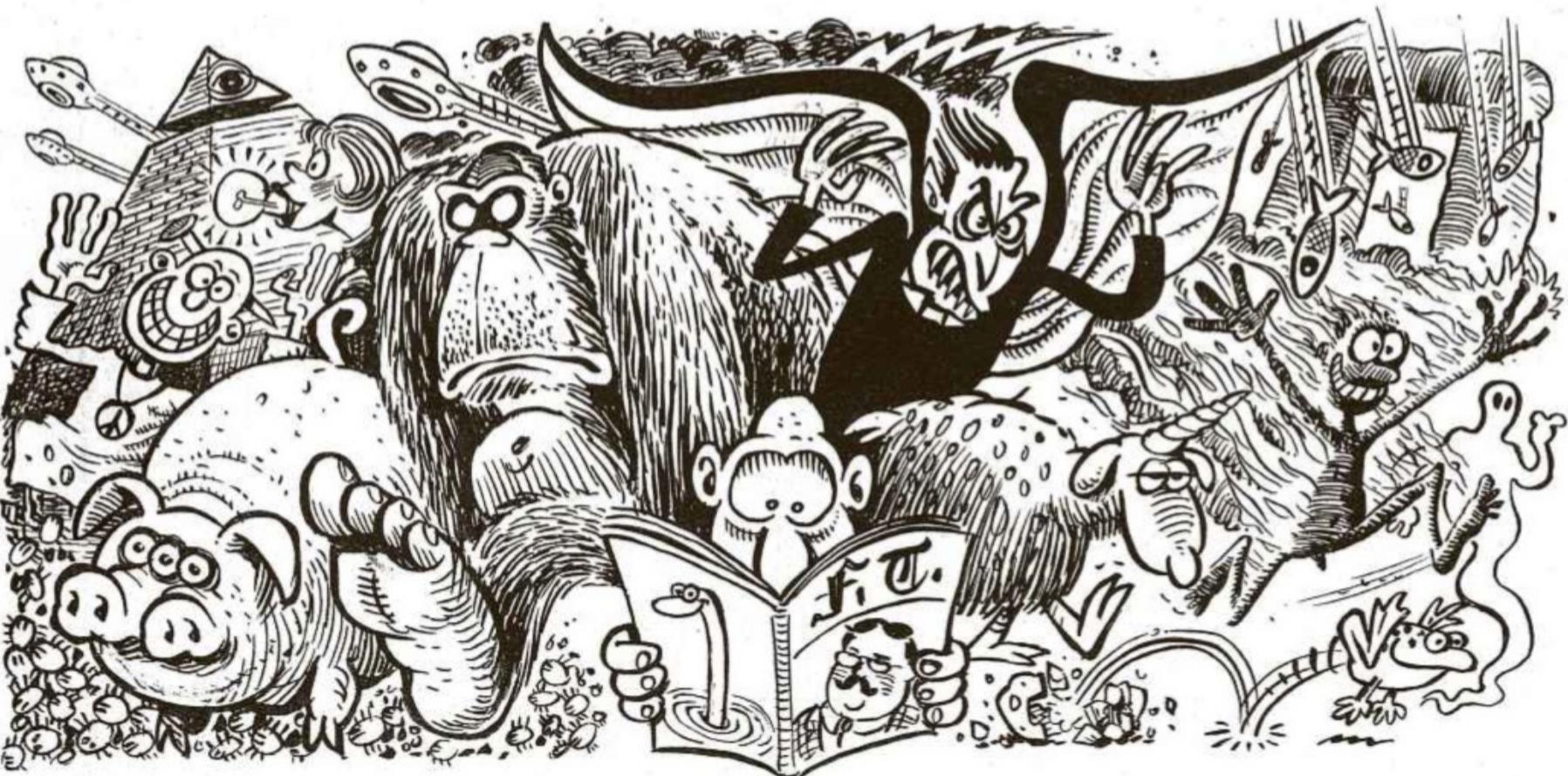
Wrappers Delight, by Jonny Trunk, is available from FUEL Publishing, RRP £24.95. And if you'd like a slice of John Townsend's collection... look for the eBay ID "oldtom85".

For more collecting mania, see p18-19.

BOB FISCHER is the writer of FT's Haunted Generation column, and a radio presenter for BBC Tees. He tweets @bob_fischer, and blogs at hauntedgeneration.co.uk

A LIFE IN PRINT

As he steps down from being FT's 'newsman', **PAUL SIEVEKING** looks back on 40 years of collating the world's weirdest news, reflects on the literary path that led him to *Fortean Times*, and presents some of his highlights from his first decade with the magazine.



HUNT EMERSON

Almost every day for the last 40 years, I've selected and paraphrased weird news stories for *Fortean Times*, receiving clippings by post (and latterly emailed news reports); a dream job, immensely informative and entertaining, but leaving little time for other projects. Having turned 70, I've thrust the baton into the capable hands of Chris Josiffe, though I hope to continue writing up archaeological discoveries and editing FT's letters pages.

By 1974 – the centenary of Fort's birth – I was living with a bunch of people in a large, squatted Victorian villa on Haverstock Hill, north London, two doors up from that theatrical genius Ken Campbell [obit FT242:30-31]. Ken was developing a script, and thought he needed input from his old chum from Chigwell School, Ion Alexis Will [bi-polar confidence trickster and smuggler; see obit FT274:24-25], but he'd lost touch and only had indirect leads in his address book. Going out to get some milk from across the road, he

"Ken Campbell was a purveyor of wonderful weirdness"



encountered Ion on the pavement in a white linen suit. He had recently returned from wanderings in the East and was working down the road in Compendium Bookshop.

"As soon as I saw [Ken] that day and saw his face," Ion recalled, "I knew something was up, and the devil in me forced me to say, quite casually, something like, 'Oh, there you are.'" ¹ Ion was Ken's astral twin (10 Dec), but a year older. It turned out both were great fans of *The News* (forerunner to *Fortean Times*), which Bob

BELOW: "At the age of eight I began a museum in an outhouse at home in Snape, Suffolk. One exhibit was the skeleton of a man unearthed at a Saxon burial ground beside Thorpe Hall near Debenham in 1958 and given to me in 1960. The Saxon, aged about 32, stood 5ft tall. I am holding his right femur, which had been broken in two and grown together badly, making one leg at least two inches shorter than the other. He must have had a very wonky gait."

Rickard had started the previous November. (I was enthralled by *The News* #6, which I picked up in Compendium.) The 'chance' meeting led to Ken's play *The Great Caper*, with Ion credited as 'spiritual advisor'.

The Great Caper, staged at the Royal Court Theatre and directed by Nicholas Wright, concerns the adventures of 'Ion Alexis Will' (played by Warren Mitchell, Alf Garnett in TV's *Till Death Us Do Part*) and his trusty Boswell, Stu Lyons (played by Ken), who decide that a bewildered Eugene Grimley they find immobilised by shock in a tube station is carrying "a sperm of mind-blowing significance", and set out to find him the Perfect Woman, proceeding through the byways of fortean phenomena, from *The Book of Bhrigu* (a Hindu oracle) to plagues of fleas, Adamski and UFO kidnappings to aerial

sounds, the Tarot and a Lost Tribe of Israel. They end up in Lapland's frozen tundra, where they encounter Diana, queen of air, darkness and Barkingside – and laugh in the rain (of an edible lichen), saying: "There's a whole new caper coming!"

Critic Ronald Bryden saw the play as a countercultural *Around the World in Eighty Days* with Ion as Phineas Fogg and Stu as his Passepourtout. "Campbell was a purveyor of wonderful weirdness, without being a dedicated believer himself," writes Michael Coveney². "He shared Fort's fascinated scepticism and sought ways of translating the transient nature of apparent phenomena into the paradoxically ephemeral solidity of his theatrical art. His watchword was not belief, but supposition. Something might not be true, but how magical it might be to suppose that it was."

Ken invited Bob Rickard down from Birmingham for *The Great Caper* preview on 2 October 1974, which is when he first met both Ion and me.

DOCTOR CHOODLES AND OTHERS

When I first met Bob, I was 24. I had grown up in a house full of books. At seven, I composed a story called *Michal Monster*, drawing the illustrations and dictating the narrative to my mother. Among the characters was Doctor Choodles, who recruited patients for his hospital by running them over in his ambulance. My life in print began at 12, when I helped compile a magazine at school. I spent summer holidays (1965-67) helping re-excavate the ghost of the Saxon ship at Sutton Hoo – across the Deben River from my school – which was hastily reburied as WWII loomed [see this issue's Fortean Traveller, pp72-75]. The ship's wood had turned to a shadow in the sand, studded with rust-bloated rivets. I also helped excavate a Palaeolithic lakeside settlement at High Lodge in West Suffolk, in a dig organised by my half-brother Gale, a deputy keeper at the British Museum. In the 1970s I joined digs at prehistoric hill forts – Portfield Camp in Lancashire and Hambledon Hill in Dorset.

Aged 17, swayed by Bertrand Russell and Prince Kropotkin, I had turned freethinker and anarchist, and published an alternative school magazine. I was very taken by *Ten Days That Shook the University*. This included a translation of *De la misère en milieu étudiant* by Mustapha Khayati, which had caused a stir when handed out at Strasbourg University in 1966. Khayati was a member of something called the Situationist International (SI). The only other situationist text available in English was *The Totality for Kids* (Raoul Vaneigem's *Banalités de Base*).

The SI was conceived in July 1957 (at the same time as Doctor Choodles), when members of the Imaginist Bauhaus, the Lettrist International and the London Psychogeographic Committee met in Italy. Virtual organisations were all the rage. The two main books of situationist theory were published in 1967: *La Société du Spectacle* by Guy Debord (in 221 theses, austere and



ABOVE: Paul Sieveking in Hampstead in 1982.

Apollonian); and *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* by Vaneigem (rhapsodic and Dionysian).

During *les événements* of May 1968, situationist slogans appeared across Paris. I was in West Berlin, working as an apprentice in a photo-offset printing factory. In July I was in Bulgaria for the Ninth World Youth Festival, attending as a delegate of the "East Anglian Libertarian League" (don't ask), and had a painting on exhibition in Sofia. As I reported in *Freedom*, the anarchist newspaper, burly Bulgars kept appearing to break up seminars and manhandle dissidents, and became known sarcastically as SBWs (Spontaneous Bulgarian Workers). State security attempted (unsuccessfully) to keep the Czech delegation in quarantine; weeks later, on 21 August, Soviet tanks snuffed out the Prague Spring.

In October I went up to Jesus College, Cambridge, to read Archaeology and Anthropology. I shared tutorials with Michael Hunter, who subsequently has done significant research on scepticism in the early modern period and is the leading authority on Robert Boyle. Andrew Munro introduced me to Fort's *Book of the Damned*. There was a fantastic alternative bookshop on King Street called The Land of Cokayne, run by John Nicholson and Cecilia Boggis. Nicholson later helped found the Small Press Group. He published a magazine called *Arcana*, with articles on geomancy by Nigel Pennick and Tony Roberts. I contributed a feature on Wilhelm Reich's last book, *Contact with Space*, and his duels with flying saucers in Arizona using an orgone cloudbuster.

I published several best-forgotten magazines, one with détourned biblical drawings by Basil Wolverton from *The Plain Truth*. Antony Gormley (at Trinity, reading Arch & Anth) drew Leda and the Swan for the cover of my poetry magazine

Origo and also did drawings for a feature on psychedelics in a magazine that proofreading forgot, which I published in 1970 with John Fullerton. This also featured "The Organisation of Appearances" (translated from Vaneigem's *Traité*) and a drawing of a giant Priapic Aleister Crowley tearing the college down, drawn by Patrick Gaffney – who became the right-hand man of lecherous guru Sogyal Rinpoche and co-edited his bestselling *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Tony Wilson was very excited by the situationist texts and we travelled to London to join in the occupation of the London School of Economics. Tony went on to found the Haçienda nightclub in Manchester, named after an exhortation in *Internationale Situationniste #1* (1958): "You'll never see the haçienda. It doesn't exist anywhere. The haçienda must be built".

The first section of Vaneigem's *Traité* appeared in 1970 in two black-clad pamphlets under the title *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. John Fullerton and I translated the rest in 1972 and, after touting it round various publishers, I eventually printed the full text (300pp) in March 1975 under that title, the first book by "Practical Paradise Publications". I used the beat-up old photo-offset printer in the Young Vic Theatre, where I had a job printing the programmes. Five hundred copies went quickly and I reprinted in November. Perfect binding in the Seventies often wasn't perfect. When pages fell out in clumps, it was seen by some as a critique of the book as commodity, in the manner of Guy Debord's *Mémoires* (1959), published in sandpaper covers that damaged adjacent books.

As the long hot summer of 1976 waned, I took off for India for six months, where I attended discourses by Krishnamurti and Rajneesh, and bathed in the Ganges at the Pryag/Allahabad Kumbh Mela (January

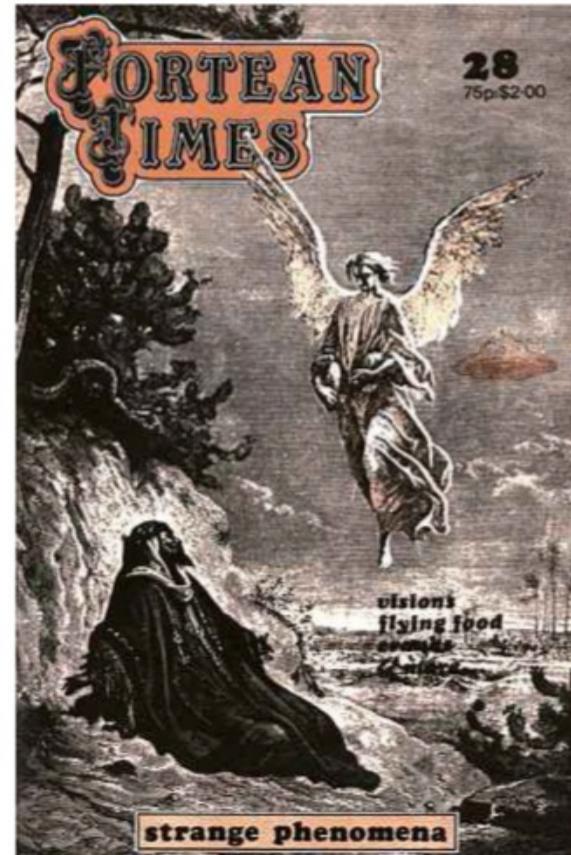
1977), along with 19 million pilgrims. Returning to Blighty, my other Practical Paradise publications were a revised translation of *La Société du Spectacle* (1977) and *Mama Coca* (1978), a politico-botanical study of coca by Anthony Henman.

Jay Landesman [obit FT281:28-29] commissioned me to read through 45 massive albums of news clippings gathered by George Ives, a friend of Oscar Wilde who wrote on criminology and founded the Order of Chæronea, a secret society working toward gay decriminalisation. Jay had found the albums on the pavement outside a junk shop in Camden Passage, Islington. From 1892 to his death in 1950, Ives collected and pasted in his albums news stories covering odd behaviour, outrageous punishment, mad opinions and all manner of fortean phenomena. The result was my book *Man Bites Man; the Scrapbook of an English Eccentric* (Penguin, 1981).

THE GANG OF FORT

In 1978 I joined the Gang of Fort (a riff on China's Gang of Four), which met every Tuesday above Dark They Were and Golden Eyed, the science fiction bookshop in Soho. It was then that Bob and I discovered a shared sense of humour and a fascination with the world's quirky fringes that has lasted until today. The world was far stranger than the "official version"; subverting consensus reality seemed both necessary and fun.

Fortean Times in the 1970s was paperback-size, black-and-white, and created on home typewriters. It was twinned with *The Ley Hunter*, then edited by Paul Devereux, in the same format. Bob Rickard and Steve Moore (obit FT314:24-27) gathered news stories by theme under Hunt Emerson's inimitable topic headers – Falls, Mystery Attacks, Alchemy and Elixirs, Synchronicities, Disappearances, and so on. Steve also did a regular oriental column called "Tales from the Yellow Emporium". Ian Alexis Will was an offbeat catalyst, who proclaimed we belonged to the Three-Legged Toad Cabal, and arranged the first Fortsorts, where we divided clippings into about 50 categories.



"The Gang of Fort met above Dark They Were and Golden Eyed"

In my first news roundup, under Hunt's header for Compulsions, I covered snatchers, snippers, slashers, biters and jabbers. In the closing months of 1978 the high-heel hijacker of Seattle was giving the cops a headache. In September he laid in wait in bushes, but by December he was grabbing shoes just as they were raised off pavements. Sales of flat shoes and sandals were booming. Thanks to George Ives, I was able to provide precedents: "In 1913 a slipper snatcher haunted New York. In 1924, London tram driver John Pitman,

31, was caught in the act. Several incidents had preceded... Then, in 1929, shoes were snatched in Stockholm – only small dainty shoes... Always odd shoes. As Fort said: 'If Jack the Slipper-snatcher were in the secondhand business, he'd have manoeuvred girls into having both feet in the air.'"

Here's one zinger from Ives's scrapbooks. In May 1907, itinerant gardener Albert Steer vanished. Shortly afterwards, a man was found drowned, and was identified as Steer by his son and daughter. Both Steer and the dead man were one-eyed, had a crushed toe and a dent over an eyebrow. Two months after the dead man was buried, Steer turned up. *Evening News*, 3 July 1907. I have subsequently chronicled many people turning up after their own funerals; it's a trope, like parking wardens ticketing cars with dead drivers inside and crooks getting stuck in chimneys.

Ives also documented an epidemic of clothes-slashing in the north of England in 1938 – which prompted Michael Goss to research and write *The Halifax Slasher: an Urban Terror in the North of England* (published as *Fortean Times* Occasional Paper #3 in 1987). My Compulsion round-up included the tale of the Specs Snatcher of Thornley Heath, who had seized glasses off the noses of at least 30 women in south London since 1975. When he was caught a few days after my report came out [FT28:11, 39:21], I fleetingly entertained delusions of magical influence.

Under Hunt's Dooms heading, I collected some jinxes and impressive tales of woe: "Sometimes the jinx falls more on those around the walking disaster area. Take Dr Max Benis, a specialist in allergies, who has been in the right place at the right time on at least 19 occasions to help people in distress. Wherever he goes, people begin to drown, fall off high rocks right at his feet, choke on their food in the same restaurant, or touch live wires. Says the *Daily Mail* (6 Dec 1977): 'Not many of his victims seems particularly grateful to Dr Max'." [FT28:43]

Issue # 28, the last *FT* before full colour covers, was printed by Israeli entrepreneur



ABOVE: Hunt Emerson's 'Compulsions' header, marking Paul's first news round-up in FT28.

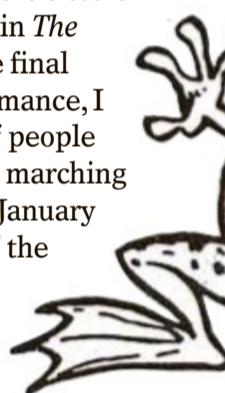
Uri Paz in northern Greece and shipped to London in the boot of a tourist bus in early 1979. It contained my review of *The Warp*, Neil Oram's shaggy autobiographical saga performed at the ICA Theatre in the Mall and directed by Ken Campbell, with a minuscule Arts Council grant of £7,500. Officially the longest play in the world, described as "the acid Archers with weird bits", it has about 200 parts (including Buckminster Fuller and Hyde Park Corner orator Billy McGuinness) played by dozens of actors. There was Bill Nighy (Ken called him 'Niffy') and Jim Broadbent, one of whose roles was a Yorkshire greengrocer who had visions of Ramana Maharishi and had encountered lots of humanoids and two men in a 1940s black limousine.

There is a curious prediction from one character about mass suicide rallies, written more than a month before the Jonestown People's Temple cyanide ceremony of 18 November 1978, where over 900 people died. I had stayed in Neil Oram's domain by Loch Ness, sleeping in a turf-covered dome across the water from Crowley's Boleskine House. Our erstwhile partners were sisters and both were portrayed in *The Warp*. Emerging from the final 22-hour marathon performance, I encountered hundreds of people in 17th century costumes marching down the Mall. It was 21 January 1979, the first morning of the Year of the Goat.

INTO THE EIGHTIES

Throughout the 1980s, *Fortean Times* continued as a small format sporadic, by now fully typeset and – thanks to our art director Richard Adams of Open Head Press – with colour cover art by the likes of Gilbert Shelton and Robert Crumb. Mike Dash joined the Gang of Fort in 1983. Nigel Watson wrote a UFO column ("Enigma Variations"); Loren Coleman covered cryptozoology ("On the Trail"); Tony 'Doc' Shiels offered "Words from the Wizard"; and Michael A Hoffman gave us conspiracies and paranoia in "America Mystica". *FT* was a DIY operation; all revenue was ploughed back in to finance the following issue; we did all the mail-outs and distribution to bookshops. Subscribers included Jeremy Beadle, Jerry Garcia, Margaret Duchess of Argyll, Jackie Gleason and Prince Charles of the Belgians. Lyall Watson, author of *Supernature*, said: "There are few things in the world which are consistently rewarding, revealing or worth receiving. *Fortean Times* is one of them."

There were no editorial salaries. In the early 1980s, Bob and I earned a crust as layout artists on the last-ever hard copy edition of the British Library Catalogue (published by KG Saur in 360 stout volumes). Such artisan work with scalpels and cutting boards seems quaint in the computer age. Besides getting high on Cow Gum, one perk of the job was finding such works as



ABOVE: The Gang of Fort (or the Three-legged Toad Cabal) in Su Rose's house in London during the mail-out of FT40, 1983. Left to right: Bob Rickard, Paul Sieveking, Dick Seary, Mike Dash, Steve Moore, Ian Will.

Pre-Adamite Death proved to be a geological delusion (1863), *Alone With the Hairy Ainu* (1893), *Hand-Grenade Throwing as a College Sport* (1918), and *The Playing Cards Embody a Scientific Record of the Great Pyramid* (1905). We also discovered *The Mowing Devil: Or, Strange News out of Hartfordshire* (1678), a religious parable pressed into service as the main historical precedent for crop circles. Author names were often

amusing: Romulus Guga, Juana Bitsilli, Endel Nirk, Bert Haywang, Biserka Grabar, Gordon Bandy Enders, Gergeley Gergeley, Odd Bang Hansen...

Another handy source of income for fortean hacks and researchers was *The Unexplained* partwork by Orbis Publishing, edited by Peter Brookesmith, that ran for 156 weekly instalments between 1980 and 1983. This became an excellent multi-volume reference work with a wealth of well-researched graphics. Thanks Peter!

In 1980 I was delighted by the first pamphlet put out by the Church of the SubGenius in Dallas, Texas, entitled "The World Ends Tomorrow and YOU MAY DIE!" – a brilliant send-up of cults and evangelism. In 1984 Church father Ivan Stang declared *FT* "reputable, COOL, and not just sanctified but COMPULSORY!" He sent me a card certifying that I am "an Ordained Minister and High Priest of the Church and is on OFFICIAL BUSINESS. Donations accepted." (This is still valid, I believe.)

In July 1983 KG Saur appointed me editor of a vast project called *The British Biographical Archive* (BBA), a cumulation of biographical reference works. This involved much rummaging in library store rooms. All 324 works – dating from 1603 to 1929 – were photocopied, with text waxed, stuck on bits of A5 paper, shuffled into one alphabetical sequence and photographed. God knows how

many pages. The finished set of about 1,200 microfiche cost £4,900 and rapidly became yesterday's technology. Prof AL Rowse described it as the most notable publication in the field since the first publication of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1885.

I discovered some fascinating books on freaks and eccentrics, such as Caulfield's *Portraits, Memoirs and Characters of Remarkable Persons* (3v, 1813). I featured some of these chaps in an FT slot called 'Weird Lives', such as John Evans, the melancholy teleporting astrologer who taught William Lilly [FT44:32-33], and Francis Battalia, the stone-eater [FT45:38]. Trying to disentangle saints was often difficult; the number of Saint Bridgets is astonishing. Helping me shuffle bits of A5 paper into a rational gargantuan sequence was assistant editor Val Stevenson, now my dear wife.

In December 1984, 'The Friends of *Fortean Times*' sprung a party for Bob Rickard in the Warrington Hotel, Maida Vale, north London, where about 70 guests celebrated the 11th anniversary of the magazine. John Michell, Ken Campbell and I made speeches. There was a cabaret and a large cake in the form of a bust of Charles Fort.

In the summer of 1991, Bob and I licensed John Brown to publish *Fortean Times* for the news trade. Brown had set up his publishing company in 1987 to handle Chris Donald's *Viz*, which by late 1989 was selling more than a million copies, outselling every magazine in Britain apart from *The Radio Times*, *TV Times* and *Reader's Digest*. After five small format issues, John Brown Publishing changed *Fortean Times* to the current A4 format in June 1992. A new era had begun...

For more on the early days of FT, see FT177:18-21.

NOTES

¹ Michael Coveney: *Ken Campbell: The Great Caper*, 2011, p. 73.

² Coveney, op. cit. p. 69

HERE IS THE NEWS...

PAUL SIEVEKING presents some of his favourite stories from his first decade as FT newsman

- Black humour appeals to the Gang of Fort. I inherited the following story from my father, who clipped it from the *Daily Express* in the 1960s and kept it in his wallet: "Mourners at the burial of Anna Bochinsky of Moinesti in Rumania [sic] were astonished to see the 'dead' woman jump out of her coffin while it was being carried with the lid open, as is the custom, from the ceremony chapel to the grave. She ran into the road and was run over and killed by a car." **[FT38:19]**. I have published many examples of last-minute resurrections.
- The village of Frogmore in Hampshire was invaded by thousands of frogs, which were breeding on waterlogged building land. *D.Mirror*, 28 Mar 1969. **[FT40:26]**.
- More than 1,000 inhabitants of the Yugoslav island of Krk are called Zic – and 200 of them have the first name Antun. "It makes the sorting of letters very difficult" complained a postman – called Antun Zik. *News of the World*, 27 Feb 1977. **[FT31:37]**.
- In 1978, a man was accidentally killed in Thonburi, Thailand, in a fight with his friend over which came first, the chicken or the egg. He said it was the egg. The same argument caused the death of two men in the Philippine town of Tamban in 1987 – allegedly. *Sunday Times*, 15 Jan 1978; [R] 8 June 1987. **[FT30:12, 49:16]**.
- The following letter from Mrs BN Harris of Harrogate in Yorkshire appeared in the *Sunday Express* on 17 July 1977: "During the wartime evacuation from London we were housed in Tiverton Road, Exeter – the straight road out into the country. In the early evening before the tragic raid that so devastated the city, there was an

unbelievable exodus of cats padding in a gentle stream past our windows toward Tiverton. Knowing nothing about cats we watched in great surprise, wondering why. Before morning – sadly we knew." **[FT55:16]**.

● Gorzo the performing parrot was stolen from a theatre in Morecambe, Lancashire. The police had a clue: the thief's car registration spelt PEK. Eventually they traced it – to Stanley Parrot, 31, who was fined £50. *D.Mirror*, 5 Sept 1978. **[FT40:26]**

● In April 1979, the baby son of a couple staying in Julie Christie's farmhouse in Wales was drowned in a shallow pond. Six years before, in Nicholas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now*, Christie played the mother of a child drowned in a pond. Constable Frank Podmore, who gave evidence at the inquest, bore the same name as the early luminary of the Society for Psychical Research who drowned in a pond in 1910. **[FT34:17]**

● A man arranged to go to Haydock races in Surrey on 7 July 1979, and dreamed for several nights beforehand of the number seven. He thought his guardian angel might be trying to tell him something, so when the seventh race came round, he put all he could afford on horse number seven, Haywire, to win. It came in seventh. *D.Telegraph*, 12 July 1979. **[FT42:37]**

● It's satisfying when a legend comes to life, what folklorists called 'ostension'. Thekla Aanen of Larkollen in Norway lost her gold and diamond ring while swimming in the Oslo fjord in 1976. Three years later her grandson Robert went fishing in the fjord and brought home a 10lb (4.5kg) cod. When Thekla gutted it for supper, she found her ring. *Moss Dagblad*, July 1979. **[FT37:47]**.

● Some dramatic alien encounter reports rounded off the Seventies. On 9 November 1979, forestry foreman Bob Taylor came

upon a silver dome in Dechmont Woods, Livingston, West Lothian. He said that two spherical objects with spikes grabbed him by the trousers and dragged him towards the dome before he passed out. Lots of physical evidence: torn trousers, drag marks and indentations in the ground. **[FT31:30-31, 56:48-49]**.

Then on 26 November, Franck Fontaine supposedly disappeared for several days after a close encounter with a UFO in Cergy-Pontoise, a Paris suburb. However, in 1983, Fontaine's friend Jean-Pierre Prevost revealed the abduction had been a hoax.

● My friend Jitendra sent me a feature from an Indian magazine called *Probe* (February 1980) about a semi-aquatic feral boy in the Basti district of Uttar Pradesh. **[FT32:40]**. He lived by and in the Kuano river, catching fish with his hands. Later, Hubert Adamson – Hampstead estate agent, bon viveur, sculptor and keen fortean – travelled to the remote area in search of the river boy, but discovered he had been killed. I have documented all known cases of feral children, often reared by wolves and other animals **[FT45:44-47; 'Wild Things', FT161:34-41]**.

● Then there are hermits and wildmen. In 1956, Michael Fomenko, allegedly the son of a Russian princess, retreated into the rainforests of Queensland, sickened by the world of humans, and became a near-legendary Australian Tarzan figure. He was finally taken into care in 2012 and died in August 2018, aged 88. DB Benson went AWOL from the US Army and spent 34 years in the Kiamichi Mountains of Oklahoma before turning up at his parents' house in 1977. Karp Lykov and his family spent more than 40 years in the Siberian Taiga without meeting another soul **[FT45:52]**. There were many like him (mostly men), hiding out in the wilderness or some fetid cellar **[FT36:13-16]**.

● Edwin Robinson suffered a severe head injury in a 1971 road accident, gradually losing his sight and hearing. On 4 June 1980, he was struck down by lightning outside his house in a suburb of Portland, Maine, and remained unconscious for 20 minutes. He survived because of his rubber-soled shoes. Afterwards, he found his vision restored and he could hear perfectly without his hearing aid – which, in any case, had been burnt out. *[AP]* 7 June 1980. **[FT53:29]**

● There were some choice poltergeist cases in 1983. For months, showers of stones seem to materialise in mid-air and pelt the family of Peter Kavoi in the town of Machakos in Kenya. There were many witnesses. Sometimes the stones

THE CATS OF WAR

The following letter from Mrs B.N.Harris of Harrogate in Yorkshire appeared in the *Sunday Express* on 17 July 1977:

"During the wartime evacuation from London we were housed in Tiverton Road, Exeter – the straight road out into the country. In the early evening before the tragic

raid which so devastated the city, there was an unbelievable exodus of cats padding in a gentle stream past our windows towards Tiverton. Knowing nothing about cats we watched in great surprise, wondering why. Before morning – sadly we knew."



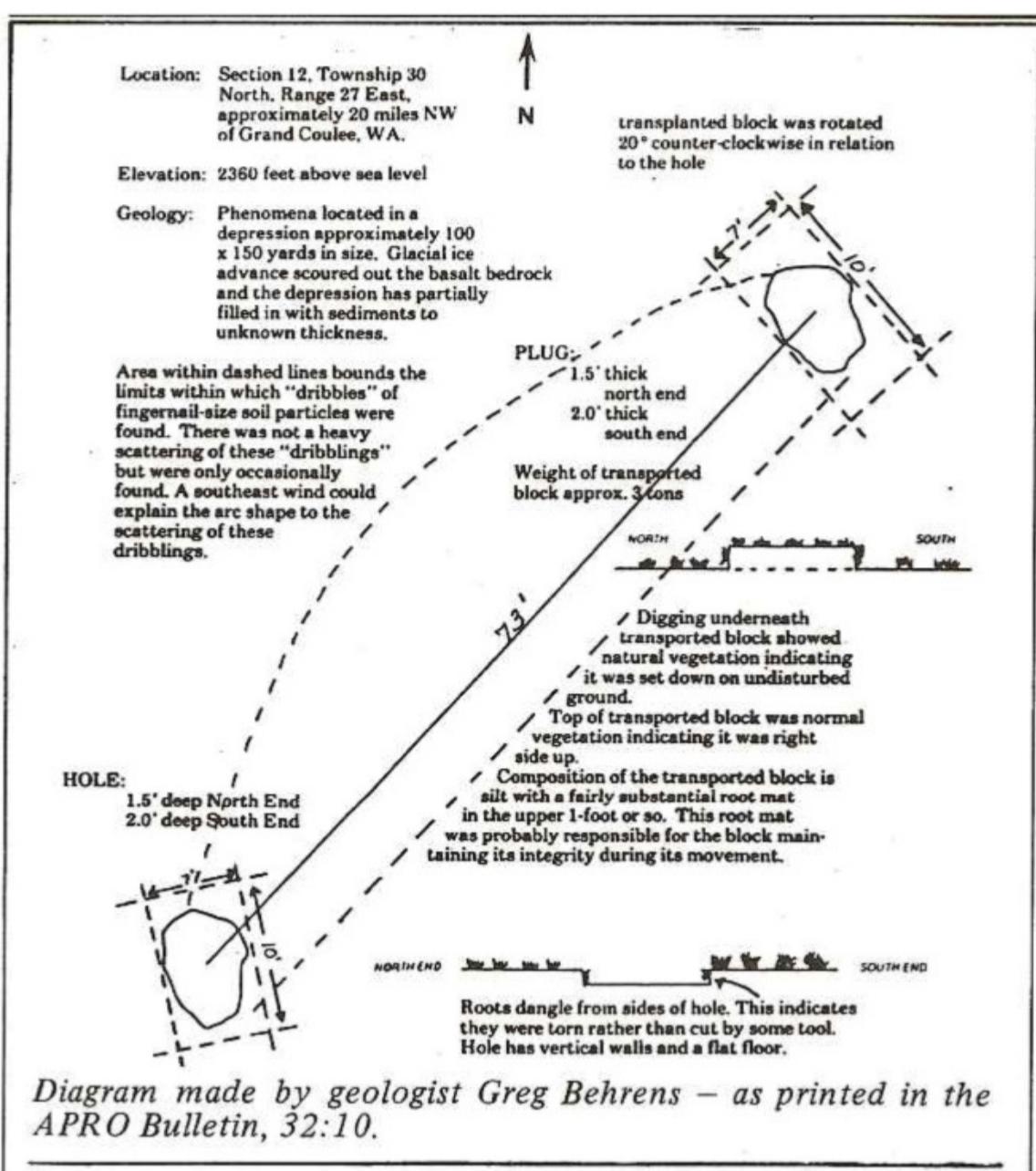


Diagram made by geologist Greg Behrens – as printed in the APRO Bulletin, 32:10.

ABOVE: How the earth divot was moved, from FT44. FACING PAGE: Hunt Emerson's wonderful illustration of a wartime feline exodus from Exeter.

fell vertically; at other times they whizzed along horizontally from different directions. Meanwhile, Warncliffe and Beech Creek in West Virginia were plagued by mysterious outbreaks of fire. Similar fire outbreaks occurred in the mountain village of San Gottardo in northern Italy in 1990. [FT43:44, 44:36-37, 55:28]

● A dud 9in shell, World War II vintage, crashed from a sunny sky into the backyard of Fred Simons, 79, in Lakewood, southeast of Los Angeles, on New Year's Day 1984. The rusty 22lb (10kg) missile left a crater 4ft (1.2m) deep. No one reported hearing or seeing an aircraft. [AP] 3 Jan 1984. [FT42:14].

● One mystery of 1984 has long stayed with me. A large plug of earth and turf, 10ft by 7ft (3x2m) and 2ft (60cm) deep, was found in October on a wheat farm near Grand Coulee, Washington State. It had clearly come from a hole 75ft (23m) away. The hole had vertical walls and a fairly flat bottom. Between earth divot and hole were two 'dribblings' of stones and earth, but there was no sign the divot had been mechanically made, or somehow rolled or dragged. Roots dangled intact from both hole and divot. It was clear some force had torn – not cut – the three-ton plug from the ground, transported it

through the air without it falling to pieces, and set it down gently the right way up. [FT44:8-10].

● In February 1985, children in Asdee, Co Kerry, Ireland, saw statues of Jesus and Mary moving – so they said. By the summer there was a veritable epidemic of meandering masonry, most famously at Ballinspittle, Co. Cork, where the BVM waved. There were reports of statues bleeding and weeping, as well as moving, from more than 40 sites all over Ireland. [FT45:6-7, 30-34].

● Mrs Titi Sitianah and Ms Saryati, teachers at a kindergarten school in Cijantung, East Jakarta, were on their way by bus to the mayor's office on 13 January 1986. A man got on the bus, shook their hands and at once read their palms. They were soon deep in friendly conversation. He asked them for their money and jewellery, which they immediately gave him. He then asked them if they had done this willingly and they said they had. A few minutes later, the man got off the bus. Only later did the women realise what had happened. *Jakarta Post*, 15 Jan 1986. Hypno-theft is an intriguing phenomenon.

● Peasant farmer Shigechiyo Izumi died in Japan on 21 February 1986 at the alleged age of 120 years and 237 days, and was

recognised by *Guinness World Records* as the oldest authenticated supercentenarian [FT47:54]. However, it later transpired that he was probably 'only' 105, the birth certificate touted as his being that of an elder brother, who had died young. I have kept a keen eye on very old folk, who often spout surprising advice for longevity and occasionally exemplify bodily renewal, such as third dentition or anamelanism (white hair returning to black) [FT48:64-70].

● Three fishermen from Kiribati in the Pacific survived 119 days, starting on 4 April 1986, adrift in an open boat by catching sharks with their hands, drinking their blood and eating them raw. One Saturday night, tired of shark, they prayed for a different kind of fish, whereupon something fell from the sky into the boat. It was a rare blackish fish that never comes to the surface and lives at a depth of 620ft (190m). *D.Telegraph*, 25 Aug 1986. [FT48:16]

● After receiving a 380-volt shock in a mine near Donetsk, Ukraine, in 1978, crane driver Yuliya Vorobyreva spent two nights in a mortuary. She awoke with the first cut of an autopsy, didn't sleep for six months, then fell into a long sleep from which she emerged with a wild talent. She could see into people, as if with X-ray vision. She could also see through asphalt to the soil beneath, detect ultraviolet light and predict storms. She was employed at Donetsk hospital to diagnose rare illnesses, such as diseases of the pancreas. She impressed a reporter from *Izvestia* (14 June 1987) by telling him what he had for breakfast [FT49:8]. Another person said to have similar X-ray vision is the Chinese woman Zheng Xiangling [FT52:14, 57:27].

● In September 1987, William and Minnie Clyde Winton, a couple in their 70s, found the walls and floors in their Atlanta, Georgia, house oozing droplets of blood. The six-room house, where they had lived for 22 years, was free of vermin and they had no pets. A crime lab found the blood was human, type O; the couple were both type A. There was a similar phenomenon in Picardy, France, the previous year. *Sunday Express*, 16 Feb 1986; [AP, UPI] 10 Sept 1987. [FT48:6, 50:24]

● On 10 February 1989 the inhabitants of the tiny town of Fyffe in Alabama witnessed the return to Earth of the late glittering pianist Liberace – double-size, 12ft (3.6m) tall – who descended from a golden banana-shaped spacecraft via a moving stairway and played a medley of Hollywood show-stoppers with glowing fingers on a floating piano. Talk of the apparition brought chaos to the town with 4,000 cars jamming the main street on 6 March. A "UFO expert" said: "Too many people have seen strange things for it to be a hoax". (*Portsmouth*) News, 7 Mar 1989 [FT55:33].



TWILIGHT OF THE (AMERICAN) GODS

SD TUCKER concludes his glimpse into the weird world of Japan's Happiness Realisation Party, finding a new war has broken out between Earth and Heaven – and this time, the gods have nukes.

The world today seems more unstable than at any point since the end of the Cold War. But why? A sensible account might guess that the inexorable demographic, financial and military decline of the West, combined with the economic and technological rise of China and renewed Russian aggression, have created a more multi-polar globe. An alternative explanation might be that the ghost of America's 32nd President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, has ruled our planet as its god behind the scenes ever since his death in 1945, but that recently his ageing spirit has begun to weaken. This is the view of 'Master' Ryuho Okawa, a Japanese spiritual leader and politician, founder of both the Happy Science (HS) religious movement and its affiliated political offshoot, the Happiness Realisation Party (HRP), who, as we saw last issue (FT389:48-51), possesses the amazing ability to channel the spirits of the famous political dead and ask them hard questions, a bit like a Spiritualist Jeremy Paxman. In a brutal 2013 grilling, Roosevelt admitted, through the Master's mouth, that he had knowingly allowed Japan to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 and thus draw the US into WWII; this was because he "felt friendly towards China", as his mother "had many Chinese friends", and wished to defend it from Tokyo's troops. With the Axis powers then defeated in 1945, this laid the ground for the American values of "freedom and democracy" to spread around the world... but not, of course, in Red China or Russia. FDR admitted he had foolishly trusted the superficially avuncular Soviet dictator Josef Stalin during WWII "because he had a moustache", and did not yet realise Marxism "was as scary as it truly is".

For 70 years, the post-war global settlement created by the victorious Allies of the Anglosphere had allowed Washington to dominate the world, which was FDR's plan all along. In death, he had become "the God of America, you know", who watched over his nation "like an Emperor", having created "the American Century" which had colonised nearly all mankind through the new Holy Trinity of ICBMs, Hollywood and Coca-Cola. The more that foreign lands became Americanised, the greater FDR's ghost grew; as in Neil Gaiman's novel, the more people believed in the presiding



HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

COMPARED TO FDR, CHRIST WAS NOW ONLY "A MINOR GOD"

American Gods, the more powerful they became. Compared to FDR, Jesus Christ was now "weak" and only "a minor god", with Roosevelt himself being simply "the greatest".

Okawa, however, could see FDR was deluded. By defeating Japan, America had inadvertently facilitated Mao Tse-Tung's Long March to victory and Communist China's subsequent ascent to Washington-threatening global superpower. Thus FDR had doomed himself in the long run, said The Master: "Roosevelt will become weaker as America declines... There's a relationship between the god of a country and that country's prosperity. The god becomes powerful along with the country, and when the country weakens, so does the god."¹ But if FDR's ghost was melting away like a vampire at sunrise, then whose reanimated corpse

ABOVE: President Franklin D Roosevelt, the ruling deity of planet Earth since his death in 1945, flanked by Winston Churchill (recently a ghostly advisor to Master Okawa) and Josef Stalin (of the deceptive moustache).

was now rising from the geopolitical grave along with China?

KOREA ADVICE SERVICE

As Master Okawa's "spiritual power is at the height of what human beings can achieve, surpassing even the spiritual greatness of religious leaders like Jesus Christ", he is able to draw out the subconscious minds of living statesmen, alongside the departed souls of dead ones like FDR, and thereby "doubtlessly capture the politicians' true colours most faithfully". A person's summoned subconscious "is unable to tell lies", which makes such dialogue a valuable insight into what is really going on inside world leaders' heads, both here and in the afterlife. As the mainstream Japanese media are "supposedly dominated by scientifically-oriented thought-patterns", the HRP argue, newspapers would never openly print any direct quotes from Okawa's interviews in their pages, but "in reality... they can no longer ignore the information" elicited and reporters are "using them as a major source

of information” anyway, as are elected politicians when weighing up delicate foreign policy decisions. How could they not? After all: “This is super media – a source from another dimension!” the “informational value” of which is “enormous”. For example, what is unfolding in North Korea nowadays? That forbidden, sealed-off land truly deserves its label of the ‘Hermit Kingdom’. Were it not for Master Okawa’s journalistic powers, there would be no way even for the world’s greatest intelligence agencies to know that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is secretly being led by a giant crab.

In 2013, HS exclusively revealed on their fearless news website The Liberty Web that the foundational North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung had inexplicably become “a fearsome ghost that lives in a pitch-black church-like building deep inside a maze-like tunnel” in the Otherworld. Only Master Okawa had the correct credentials to approach this hideous 10-metre-long *yokai*, which looked “like a cross between a crab and a spider” with six jointed legs covered in “glittering eyes” and an “insect-like” mouth with “small antennae” protruding from either side. Worst of all, this Lovecraftian horror had “the face of Kim Jong-Un on his backside”, indicating a close “spiritual connection” between Kim and his young grandson, who had been ruling North Korea with an iron claw under his grandad’s guidance since 2011. Interrogating Crab-Kim, Okawa uncovered that the DPRK plotted to defeat South Korea within three days, transforming their conquered brethren into “slaves from Africa” while the Marxists of the North would “live like the citizens of Rome”. Japan would also “naturally have to pay” for her former WWII sins, with the nation’s women soon to be forced into prostitution before being made to “dig up uranium” to fuel Commie A-bombs. But how could the Kims seize Seoul when the city was guarded by thousands of US troops? “We have about 500 tunnels,” laughed the crab. “One day [we will] suddenly burst into the South Korean suburbs and attack the cities from behind. They are stupid if they think we are going to strike them from the front... They have no idea what’s coming.” But they do now! “Thank-you very much for informing us,” said Happy journalists, the crustacean’s plans ruined.

But what of Kim Jong-Il, the current DPRK dictator’s father, who died in 2011? Well, as another “sensational scoop!” proved, the “senile” Kim 2 had actually been poisoned by Kim 3, as useless non-psychic spy agencies like the CIA had failed to divine. Kim forgave his son’s euthanasia, warning him that the US military had devised the “cowardly idea” to parachute ninjas onto his roof in the middle of the night to attack him in bed. He advised Kim to therefore “load [nukes] onto a passenger plane” and push them overboard above US-allied cities, just so long



ABOVE: North Korean soldiers carry a portrait of late North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung during a grand military parade. These days, the deceased dictator is a “fearsome ghost” who looks like “a cross between a crab and a spider”.

KCNA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

as they “actually explode” when they hit the ground. Questioning Kim Jong-Un’s own soul, Okawa discovered that, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his crab-ancestor’s birth in human form, he planned to create “a fireworks event” by shooting an ordinary short-range missile into a Japanese nuclear power-plant. Of course, by being exposed on The Liberty Web, these evil schemes were thoroughly foiled.

DEMOCRACY NEVER SLEEPS

By 2013, Kim Jong-Un had become more confident in his rule, but for Japanese PM Shinzo Abe it was another matter. Abe’s astral body had taken to visiting Okawa in his bed at night, scared: “He probably can’t sleep and must be wondering when a missile might be on its way.” Keeping world-leaders deprived of sleep was all part of Kim’s latest plan. If nervous presidents were too tired to make decisions properly, this could give the DPRK the upper hand. As Japan’s “backward mass media” refused to report on this, Master Okawa broke journalistic protocol and used “the art of traction” to drag Kim’s ghost out of his head and “haul him over to Japan” to explain himself. Kim’s spirit did not appreciate this. “Listen here, you,” it warned. “Shall I tell you the proper way to ask a question? You prostate yourself and ask.” But if Kim planned to make “the whole world... so on-edge that it can’t sleep at night”, then he could not legitimately complain about being yanked out of bed himself, so agreed to reveal his true desires. Like the fat, spoiled child he was, Kim wanted to begin “finally outshining the stars of South Korean pop-culture” and “become the world’s top leader”. But surely he had greater motivation than simply going Gangnam Style? “It’s just such

a laugh... I can keep this up for ages. I’m having a great time... Haha. I get a sense of satisfaction from bullying Japan.” But how might he humiliate his chosen victim next? “Well, there’s a possibility of airborne troops parachuting into [the Tokyo branch of] Disneyland,” Kim revealed. “I’d like to capture Disneyland, and create a special administrative region for North Korea. It’d be a good source of income too, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ve three times, no 10 times, the brains of the Japanese,” boasted Kim. “If they think that I won’t attack, I will. If they think I will attack, I won’t.” But as Japan now thought Kim *would* attack Disneyland, as he had just openly threatened to do so on The Liberty Web, he of course *did not* do so. Yet again, Master Okawa had saved the world!

In 2017, a General Election allowed the HRP to invent a new slogan, “To Protect Our Country Ourselves”, which aimed to win votes by pledging to abolish Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, imposed by America after the war (see FT387:52-55), which prevents the nation developing nuclear warheads to defend itself from giant enemy crabs. To prove the necessity of this measure, the HRP published yet more chilling words sucked straight from the skull of Kim Jong-Un: “Japan must preserve Article 9, and Japan must remain pacifists for all time. Japan should have pride in pacifism... until the day the Earth comes to an end” – that being the day Kim himself finally nukes it. The HRP committed itself to “doing the reverse of what Kim wants” by promising to “build underground nuclear shelters, double the defence budget, abolish [Japan’s] non-nuclear principles and strengthen State security by obtaining nuclear weapons.”

But voters did not like the idea of The Master having his finger on the Big Red



Button, and, as usual, the HRP returned no MPs at all (although they do at least have 21 local councillors ready and willing to defend Nippon from atomic oblivion).

This was unfortunate, as the regional situation has recently become even more complex with the sudden invasion of the body of South Korean President Moon Jae-In by the ghost of Benito Mussolini. Moon is often viewed as a peacemaker, but to the HRP he is a dangerous Communist, going around making extreme and radical pledges, such as “We will make all school meals free of charge”, to trick voters into supporting him. Once Moon gained power, Mussolini “was born again [into Moon’s head] to take revenge for WWII” by reuniting the two Koreas, seizing control of Pyongyang’s nukes, and then smashing Japan, transforming it into “a semi-slave State” to provide fascist-confiscated companies like Samsung with forced labour. As Japan was a craven “country that cannot even amend its constitution” by voting HRP and revoking Article 9, it was ripe for Mussolini-Moon’s conquest, a plan which, like Il Duce’s original mode of national socialist government over in Italy, represented “leftism at its finest”.

Okawa now conjured the spirit of Mussolini’s arch-foe Sir Winston Churchill, half-eclipsed god of that former world-spanning Empire on which the Sun has now very decidedly set, requesting a “second opinion” on Korean-Japanese relations. When Churchill was first born some 2,600 years ago, his soul had possessed “deep ties” with Master Okawa’s own previous incarnation as Gautama Buddha, so Winston agreed to help. Although Kim was much “cuter than Hitler” he could still be outwitted, Churchill advised, even by someone not exactly known for the vastness of his intellect, praising the “artistic” way Donald Trump had negotiated with the dictator recently. He then warned Okawa that – just like Mussolini’s Italy compared to Hitler’s Germany – North and South Korea were mere regional sideshows: the real danger was the People’s Republic of China. Appeasing China was like appeasing the Nazis, so Churchill recommended courting Russia, as he had once done to counter Germany.

Fortunately, Russian President Vladimir Putin was a natural ally, for, in addition to being the second coming of the Roman Emperor Augustus, he had also once been Yoshimune Tokugawa, the great eighth ruling Shogun of Japan’s feudal-era Tokugawa Shogunate. This could be



KOREA SUMMIT PRESS POOL / GETTY IMAGES

KIM WAS “CUTER THAN HITLER” BUT COULD BE OUTWITTED

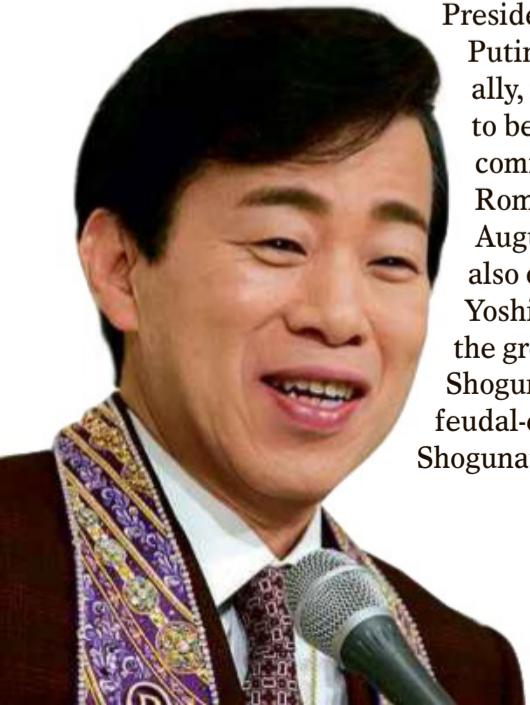
proved: “There are photos of a topless Putin riding horses and hunting on a holiday, and Yoshimune is known once to have spent his own holiday hunting without clothes on.” As “a true judoist” who had been saved from a life of crime by a love of martial-arts, this secret samurai would clearly help his former homeland of Japan defend itself against China and their pet “dinosaur” of North Korea. Putin’s soul agreed to sell Okawa truckloads of nuclear missiles at a knock-down price, if only he ever became Japanese PM (“We have more than we need. They will just get rusty here anyway... How about 10 billion apiece? What a great idea... You’d only need about a hundred, wouldn’t you?”). But it turns out Okawa may need to buy even more than that...

IN XINJIANG DID GENGHIS KHAN A STATE MISSILE-DOME DECREE
China lies behind all today’s ills, from North Korean threats to Islamist terror, as all-powerful Chinese President Xi Jinping, who stands poised to inherit the mantle of World-God from the dying FDR, is the reincarnation of history’s all-time ultra-bastard, Genghis Khan. As Chinese power waxes, Xi considers himself “emperor among emperors” and “the greatest god in the world!” as “the *weltgeist* resides in me” now, not Roosevelt. Xi, being a ruthless

ABOVE: North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un tries to figure out if South Korean President Moon Jae-in has really been taken over by the ghost of Mussolini. BELOW: Master Okawa, as happy as ever.

colonialist, wants only to “protect” other nations, just as China currently “protects Tibet from the Dalai Lama”. In the Great Chinese Empire, Africa will become a giant food store, and free speech only allowed “as long as you do it in the bathroom by yourself”. Mocking US presidents for being “as soft as a slug”, Xi boasted Chinese cash already owned the American economy, allowing Beijing to act as it pleased, especially when aided by “irate Arabs” like the ghost of Saddam Hussein.²

Xi planned to disguise 10,000 naval vessels as fishing boats to invade Japan. “We won’t really care whether 120 million Japanese die”, he said; indeed, “We don’t care if 100 million of our [own] people die”, as they had too many anyway. China must “weed out” their unemployed by conscripting them into the Red Army with the promise they could steal Japan’s females – “so tell your women to look their best, Chinese soldiers are picky.” So cruel is Xi that he “extracts organs from famous people” then sells them “as a warning to others”, and once killed a Japanese ambassador just by wishing it. The only way Xi could be stopped was if the HRP warned people about him – so he threatened to have Master Okawa assassinated by Triads! “Only a tiny fraction of the Chinese population” was clever enough to read Okawa’s books, though, “so I’m not worried”, said Xi; but “if you start publishing mangas and animes, then we’re in trouble”. But HS do publish such things, releasing many professionally-produced (apart from the scripts) anime movies as recruitment tools; like *The Laws of Eternity*, in which Hitler commands a war-



elephant in Hell, and *The Rebirth of Buddha*, in which the 1990s rivalry between Okawa and the Aum Shinrikyo cult is replayed in Japanimated form. 2012's *The Mystical Laws* depicts the Empire of Godom (re: China) capturing Japan using weapons supplied by aliens. The whole film is a cautionary metaphor, warning viewers that Genghis Xi knows "the final battle will happen in outer space".

Such films came encoded with "an extremely important new sort of 'common sense' of the Universe, which even world-class research institutions such as NASA are unable to uncover", as Okawa now had the ability to channel "Space-People", and even the ghosts of George Adamski and Zecharia Sitchin, to advise him. The resulting books, like *UFOs Caught on Camera*, provide "passenger descriptions" of ufonauts from "over 20 sectors", including "one who supports the LGBT movement on Earth, one who is experimenting with giving humans supernatural powers, and one who tries to protect people from typhoons."³ Okawa can also now diagnose the roots of acolytes' human ailments during past alien lives; one patient's Sun-intolerant eczema was caused by his previous solar-free life below ground on Mars. UFOs are not "irrelevant to public wellbeing", bearing "a note of caution from a geopolitical perspective", as not all spacemen are entirely LGBT-friendly. Just as there are good and evil races on Earth, so there are good and evil races of aliens, with the bad ones naturally allying themselves with President Xi, who "has his soul-roots in a particularly destructive extraterrestrial species" (possibly "Reptilians", "owl-type aliens", "Confucius-group aliens" or "large-nose Grays") who want to "feed on" colonised Earthlings. In 2012, Okawa remote-viewed secret Area 51-like military sites in the "vast desert" of China's remote Xinjiang region, finding "something like a giant manhole" beneath which Xi had hidden 150 nuclear missiles from prying eyes.

Yet hope arrives, in the shape of benign alien monkeys. In 2011 one brave "junior ape" from Alpha Centauri attracted human attention by crashing his spaceship off the Florida coast like a *kamikaze* pilot, which "usually means death on Earth". Such selfless displays "serve as a handshake to

LINTAO ZHANG - POOL / GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE LEFT: Chinese President Xi Jinping, reincarnation of Genghis Khan and the next World God; is that a flying saucer behind him? ABOVE RIGHT: A poster for *The Mystical Laws*, a 2012 HS-produced anime film.

invite co-operation and, one day, welcome interstellar migration". Recall how, last issue, Okawa advocated an open-door policy for foreign workers to boost Japan's GDP; how great might the Nikkei boom be if Tokyo allowed in waves of *actual* aliens? In 1853, US Commodore Matthew Perry had forcibly opened an isolationist, backwards Japan to foreign trade with his so-called 'Black Ships', ushering in the Meiji Restoration era, during which Japan, inspired by imported foreign science, rapidly industrialised to the point where, in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, it became the first non-white land to defeat modern Europeans in naval combat. The lesson was obvious: open Japan up to space-immigration or face death at the hands of Xi's hidden space-navy! "In the same light [as Meiji]," said Master Okawa, "my goal is to herald the coming Space Restoration" with a fleet of friendly Black Spaceships ready to save Japan from the Wrath of Khan. Although "not covered by the coward Japanese media", The Master called giant allied UFOs to hover outside his talks and above Chinese airports, making them "dysfunctional", whilst top-ranking HS spokesman Sokhen Kobayashi, a one-time official in Japan's Ministry of International

Trade, began to "dream about myself shooting down all the incoming [Chinese] nuclear missiles, right and left, riding on the spaceship ... as a patriotic star-warrior". The only hitch was a "recent series of strange announcements" made by Professor Stephen Hawking in 2011 that God did not exist, with mankind being "an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star". But "just because he's handicapped does not mean that his opinions hold water"—so Okawa invaded Hawking's mind, finding his true form was that of "a cyborg-type alien who came from Minor Centauri, with two antennae and big long, vertical eyes. Dr Hawking was apparently something of a robot." This allowed an evil ET "false god" named Ahriman/Kandahar, or "the Dark Lord of the flip-side of the Universe", to hack into Hawking's brain, forcing him to promote a false atheist creed "rather in a Taliban-like way", thus demoralising humans into thinking they were worthless, meekly accepting their fate under future Chinese-ET rule to become "feed, chicken or slaves".⁴ Do the Happies just mean all this as an elaborate *Godzilla*-style allegory for Japan's real-life post-WWII fate under US domination? Unhappily not.

NOTES

¹ This, and all subsequent HRP quotes, can be found on The Liberty Web: <http://eng.the-liberty.com/>

² Okawa tracked down Saddam to his new post-death home sitting "alone at the bottom of a cave" which linked the spirit world to "various countries" by streams of ghostly water. One such stream must

have led straight to Beijing, as Saddam confessed he *did* have WMDs after all, as did many Islamist dictators, these "being imported from China into Arab nations via tripartite trade agreements", the point being to create "a consolidation of all Muslim and Chinese power" to destroy the West. "You might be killed when you team up with America,"

Saddam warned the Japanese electorate, as radical Muslim ghosts were currently "unifying our interests with China". See <http://eng.the-liberty.com/2013/4282/>

³ Okawa has actually interviewed a typhoon, that which hit the Philippines in 2013. Typhoon Haiyan turned out to be Poseidon, angry with mankind for

neglecting his worship in favour of godless Chinese Communism. If mankind did not mend its ways, then the god would unleash a wave of natural disasters to destroy us all, as at Pompeii and in the days of Noah. By devastating coastlines in Southeast Asia, Poseidon was actually providing Japan and the US with cover to sneakily position their navies across

the region to counter President Xi under guise of providing humanitarian aid – if they did not accept this opportunity, then woe betide them! See <http://eng.the-liberty.com/2013/4848>

⁴ <http://heratri-topics.blogspot.com/search?q=ufo>; <https://okawabooks.com/blog/ufos-caught-on-camera-feature/>



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Fort and the Viennese trichord

ANDREW MAY unravels musical cryptograms from Bach to Schumann and finds a perfect piano portrait of Charles Fort...

Several centuries ago, composers discovered a way to insert hidden messages into purely instrumental music. It hinges on the fact that musical notes are identified by letters of the alphabet – but it's still not easy. Only seven letters are in common use, from A to G, representing a single octave of the white keys of a piano. Intermediate black notes are referred to by adding sharps or flats, and the whole sequence just repeats for higher and lower octaves.

Devotees of “musical cryptograms” found a number of ways to add other letters. The commonest (and the only one we’re going to need here) stems from an odd practice in German-speaking countries of referring to the note B as “H”, while B is reserved for B-flat. I’ve no idea why this is, but it’s given us the most famous musical cryptogram of all – BACH (i.e. B-flat, A, C, B-natural). Originally devised by Johann Sebastian Bach as a covert way of slipping his “signature” into a piece of music, it was picked up by other musical members of his family – and by a host of later composers who wanted to pay tribute to Bach’s legacy. It’s a distinctive tune, with the four notes all crammed up next to each other. This gives it a vaguely sinister, atonal feel that appealed to the 20th century “Viennese school” of avant-garde composers, such as Schoenberg and Webern (of whom more in a moment).

BACH is just the tip of the iceberg. Many other cryptograms have found their way into classical music, with some composers using the trick over



and over again. One person who was virtually obsessed with it was Robert Schumann (above), who went as far as inventing an imaginary friend named “Abegg” just so he could dedicate a work to him using those notes. Another of Schumann’s compositions, the piano suite *Carnaval* (1835), is a deliberate challenge to the listener to decipher the numerous cryptograms Schumann packed into it.

I stumbled across Wikipedia’s article on musical cryptograms¹ just after I’d read about the *Book of the Damned* anniversary in FT386. It set me thinking about a cryptogram based on “Charles Hoy Fort” – i.e. CHF, or C-B-F using the logic that turns BACH into B-flat-A-C-B. In some ways, CHF is even more interesting than BACH. For one thing, it’s more natural – literally – because it only includes B-natural, not B-flat, so you can play it entirely on the white notes of a piano.

But C-B-F aren’t just any white notes (to avoid confusion,

I’ve switched back to standard notation – but I’m still talking about “CHF”). Try playing a whole load of random three-note chords on the white keys, and you’ll never find one that sounds more dissonant than C-B-F. The interval between C and B is a semitone, which produces the archetypal “wrong note” sound, and the one between B and F is a “tritone” – three whole tones, six semitones or precisely half an octave (which contains 12 semitones). That may sound innocuous enough, but it’s an interval many musicians consider just as dissonant as a semitone.

In mediæval times, the tritone was known as *diabolus in musica*, or “the Devil in music”. More recently – particularly in the context of heavy metal music, where it’s used a lot – it’s been dubbed “the Devil’s chord”. So why is the tritone associated with the Devil? One theory is that it sounds innately evil, or at least spooky, while another holds that it’s simply a devilishly

difficult interval for musicians to harmonise². Either way, it seems appropriate enough for our “Charles Hoy Fort” cryptogram.

As I said, the combination of a tritone and a semitone produces the most dissonant three-note chord you can play on the white notes of a piano. But “dissonant” doesn’t imply “bad” – it just means the chord sounds unstable, so your ear wants it to resolve to another, more stable harmony. Personally I think C-B-F sounds really cool – and I’m not the only one. It turns out this particular set of notes is important enough to have its own name. It’s an example of the “Viennese trichord” [3], due to its popularity with the Viennese school of composers mentioned earlier. Interestingly, the people we’re talking about – chiefly Schoenberg and Webern – were at their most productive during exactly the same decades, the 1910s to 1930s, as Fort himself. And some people might argue that Fort was part of the same avant-garde æsthetic movement, too.

I discovered another thing about C-B-F (aka CHF) while I was researching this piece. If you transpose it up a fifth, to G-F-sharp-C, it’s the first three notes of “Pierrot” – one of the pieces in Schumann’s *Carnaval*. If he hadn’t written it a hundred years too early, I’d suspect it was meant to be a musical portrayal of Charles Hoy Fort!

NOTES

¹ “Musical cryptogram”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_cryptogram

² “The Devil’s music”, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4952646.stm>

³ “Post-tonal set theory”, www.jaytomlin.com/music/settheory/help.html

◆ **ANDREW MAY** is a regular contributor to FT whose recent books include *Rockets and Ray Guns and Astrobiology: The Search for Life Elsewhere in the Universe*.

Culture-bound syndromes: RIP?

MARK GREENER asks whether the disappearing penis will finally vanish...

In October 2010, *MiD DAY*, a newspaper in Mumbai, reported: "Mass panic at labour camp in Goregaon as 25 men suffer from 'retracting' genitalia" – a condition called *koro*. One *koro* sufferer experienced "extreme heat emanating from my body. My genitalia were retracting and I was really worried. Later, on my friends' advice, I jumped into a tub of iced water and sat there for three to four hours".¹

Koro patients – typically young men – experience a profound fear that their genitals are disappearing into their abdomens. *Koro* is a classic culture-bound syndrome: a constellation of symptoms that form a disease in a specific society or culture. But many culture-bound syndromes, long a mainstay of reports in FT, may be on the verge of extinction.

Koro usually begins with tingling in the feet and legs. The tingling then spreads into the abdomen and other parts of the body. Tradition holds that the tingling and other symptoms arise when "bad air" or "bad spirits" enter the body through the toes and feet. A sudden intense anxiety grips *koro* patients that their genitalia – including the nipples of females – will disappear into their body.² Ghosts traditionally do not possess genitals, leading some sufferers to fear that *koro* might prove fatal.³ However, a West Indian immigrant who presented with *koro* at a London hospital worried that the retraction would end in him becoming female.⁴

Koro usually occurs in outbreaks, often stoked by media reports. But the reports feed into a widespread belief system. During an outbreak in Assam, people "from all walks of life"

SINGAPORE

KORO 'NOT THREAT TO MANHOOD'

SINGAPORE, Tuesday (AAP-Reuter). — The Singapore Government is seeking to calm thousands of men who fear their manhood is threatened by a mysterious ailment sweeping the city.

ues, a panel of senior doctors said that *koro* was purely a psychological ailment caused by mass hysteria.

But despite the weight of medical evidence and the Government's campaign to dispel the rumours, the pork business in Singapore has fallen to a fraction of



TOP: A news report from 8 November 1967 on the *koro* panic in Singapore.
ABOVE: A man in South China desperately hangs on to his disappearing privates.

used folk medicine to prevent their genitals from disappearing inside their body. Even in cities, people from "all sections" of society smeared lime on their ear lobes to protect themselves from *Koro*.⁵

Koro patients may go to painful lengths to stop their genitals from vanishing. Some tie strings around their genitalia or grip them tightly. Others ask family members and friends to firmly

grasp their genitalia. Injuries are, not surprisingly, common. Some patients attend emergency departments sitting in a tub of water or with a wet cloth draped over their genitals. As, according to folk medicine, body heat causes symptoms, keeping genitals cool prevents retraction.

Although *koro* seems exotic, every culture has its own ways of translating mental distress into physical symptoms (so-

called somatisation). Medical anthropologist Andrew Russell notes that the organs that "become the focus of anxiety" may differ depending on the culture. In China, for example, somatisation may focus on the liver, spleen, kidney or heart. In Iran and the Punjab, the heart is a common focus, while in English speaking world it's the bowels. "The expression of physical complaints in these organs is often a metaphorical and more socially acceptable way of indicating emotional distress," he comments.⁶ People with *koro* experience palpitations, sweating, breathlessness, chest discomfort and restlessness, which are also some of anxiety's somatic symptoms in the West. So, perhaps we experience anxiety as 'butterflies in the stomach' or bowel changes. Some people from India translate the same distress into *koro*. And *koro* can be a symptom of serious psychiatric diseases, including schizophrenia.

Dhat describes the extreme anxiety surrounding semen loss in India and some other cultures. Yet American, Chinese, European and Russian men have experienced *dhat*-like syndromes at different points in history, often ascribed to nocturnal emissions or masturbation.⁷ Leading Victorian doctors, for example, suggested that semen loss, especially through masturbation, caused serious psychiatric illnesses, physical and mental impairment, and moral degeneration.⁸

However, just because better treatment and improved health literacy means that a syndrome disappears in one part of the world, that doesn't mean that the remaining manifestations should be labelled a culture-bound syndrome. "Better control of the infectious diseases in the western world would not mean relabelling... common infections in the Asian/African cultures as culture-bound," Balhara and Goel note.⁹ In other words, culture-bound syndromes may be



a label for universal concerns and expressions of distress, and not specific diagnoses.

Indeed, some culture-bound syndromes may be on the verge of extinction. For example, the brain fag syndrome, characterised in Nigeria around 1960, has several distinctive symptoms including: impaired mental ability and senses; pain or a burning sensation in the head and neck; sad and tense expressions; and “a characteristic gesture” where people pass their hand over the surface of the scalp or the top of head. Typically, brain fag emerges at times of intensive study, such as before exams, when patients are mentally exhausted.

A survey of 102 psychiatrists in Nigeria found that 98 per cent recognised ‘brain fag syndrome’. But only 22 per cent diagnosed the condition, preferring to ascribe the symptoms to, for example, anxiety and somatisation.⁹ Younger psychiatrists were less likely to diagnose brain fag symptoms than older doctors. Registrars, for example, were 90 per cent less likely to diagnosis brain fag syndrome than consultants. The authors predict, if the trends continue, that “decline and possible extinction in the use of this diagnosis among Nigerian psychiatrists, critically within the society in which this culture-bound syndrome was originally described”.¹⁰

The reasons for the fall in brain fag’s diagnostic popularity are not clear, but the decline parallels wider cultural changes, perhaps, in part, driven by globalisation. Brain fag was “a familiar idiom of distress” when some senior clinicians were being educated; today, it is “no longer common cultural parlance” in Nigerian society. The study’s authors, who are of Nigerian ancestry and work in the country, rarely hear the term “outside academic circles”.

Arguably, medical diagnostic categories may perpetuate culture-bound syndromes after the term falls into disuse in society more widely.

Some culture-bound syndromes are remarkably widespread. Initially, psychiatrists believed



ABOVE: *Hikikomori* syndrome: about one in 100 young adults (usually males) in Japan withdraw from the outside world.

koro was confined to people of South China and Yangtze valley, where it’s called *suo yang*. Later they identified *koro* in India, Western Africa, and America.¹¹ In the UK, *koro* has been reported in, among others, European Caucasians and West Indian immigrants.¹²

The *hikikomori* syndrome is also recognised increasingly outside Japan, its culture of origin. People with the *hikikomori* syndrome – typically adolescent males – completely withdraw from society for at least six months.¹³ In one case, for two years, a 19-year-old Japanese male spent 23 hours a day in his room with the door closed. His mother left trays of food outside his bedroom. He slept during the day and spend the rest of his time surfing the Internet, chatting online, reading manga and playing video games.¹⁴

Initially described as ‘withdrawal neurosis’ in 1978, the *hikikomori* syndrome is developed by about one in 100 young adults in Japan. Cases have also occurred in, for example, Oman, Spain, India, Iran, Korea, Bangladesh, Australia and the USA. The geographical and societal diversity of *koro*, *hikikomori* and other conditions calls into question the entire idea of culture-bound syndromes.

While they are fascinating,

perhaps the demise of culture-bound syndromes is not a bad thing. As *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* notes, “better understanding across cultures will lead to more balanced and nuanced approaches” to the diagnosis of mental distress.¹⁵ Indeed, better understanding culture-bound syndromes will help uncover the multitude of factors that contribute to psychiatric illness and hopefully improve treatment for people enduring mental distress whether they’re in Osaka, Oldham or Onitsha.

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1 K Ranga, “The curious case of shrinking genitalia”. Available at: www.mid-day.com/articles/the-curious-case-of-shrinking-genitalia/99655.

2 R Kumar, HR Phookun, and A Datta, “Epidemic of Koro in North East India: An observational cross-sectional study”, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 2014; 12:113-117.

3 PC Ang and MP Weller, “Koro and psychosis”, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 1984; 145:335-335.

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5 A Russell, *The Social Basis of Medicine*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

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14 AR Teo, “A new form of social withdrawal in Japan: A review of Hikikomori”, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 2010; 56:178-185.

15 Ventriglio, Ayonrinde, and Bhugra, op. cit.

For more *koro*/penis panics, see FT56:33, 82:30, 87:45, 93:10, 99:12, 103:12, 104:53, 105:20, 126:50, 126:66, 148:23, 156:10, 179:27, 211:16, 213:73, 217:73, 238:15, 240:74, 273:10, 303:25, 323:24, 388:7.

MARK GREENER is a Cambridge-based medical writer and clinical editor of Pharmacy Magazine. He writes regularly for a wide variety of publications, including Fortean Times.

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Dried cats, skulls and charms

Helen Cornish examines how finds beneath the floorboards reveal how our not-too-distant ancestors protected their homes against maleficent magic

Magical House Protection

The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft

Brian Hoggard

Berghahn Books 2019

Hb, 354pp, £99, illus, bib, ind, ISBN 9781789202052

Diving into Brian Hoggard's *Magical House Protection* is a remarkable experience. This detailed compendium of revealed objects and apotropaic material culture found in our built environment, particularly in houses and churches, brings together documented and sometimes familiar findings, such as the Sittingbourne Cache and the Witch Post in Oxford Pitt Rivers Museum, as well as many objects that have been reported to Hoggard.

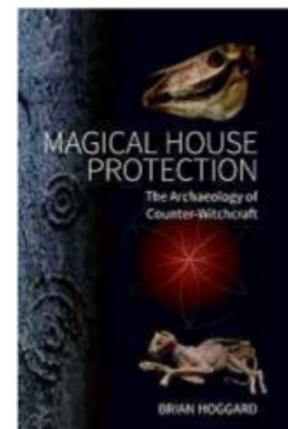
This book is the outcome of a long survey on counter-magic, but its publication is timely as the materiality of magical and occult pasts is becoming a serious research subject, with recent works from Ceri Houlbrook and Ronald Hutton. The result is a treasure trove that reports and reflects on how inhabitants of an enchanted universe approached magical house protection to ward off ghosts, fairies and witches.

It is usefully presented in two sections. The first discusses principal finds and organises artefacts according to type (concealed shoes, horses skulls, witch's marks, dried cats, witch-bottles, written charms). The conditions in which different kinds of objects were found or marks revealed are explained. Hoggard draws on theories presented by archaeologists, folk-

lorists and historians to consider why such practices might have been carried out by people living in a world where the reality of witchcraft provided concern. The second section presents pertinent case studies that attest to the effort earlier generations took to protect their hearth and health from supernatural dangers, and includes the renovation of a 16th-century house in north Italy which offered daisy wheel graffiti, coins lodged above doorways and shoes in loft spaces amongst other possible apotropaic examples. These illustrations are followed by a Gazetteer that lists finds in the United Kingdom, county by county, and across North American states.

The book reveals that a wide variety of artefacts that might be considered as magical protection have been found concealed in attics, cellars, between the walls or in the foundations of dwellings, often behind the chimney stack, on doors, or above the lintels: places where unseen danger might enter. Sometimes single objects are uncovered; others are large collections, "spiritual middens", that may have been added to over generations of inhabitation.

Not all apotropaic phenomena are meant to be hidden: witch marks and symbols (such as daisy wheels, overlapping or concentric circles, Christograms, slashes and mesh patterns) are found etched on domestic doorways and hearths, churches, on tombs and gravestones. This kind of graffiti has been observed in caves as well as in buildings and on objects. The author also notes



"There remain keen interests in the possibility of a magically precarious world"

that the deliberate scorching of beams and carved footprints are visible signs to ward off harm and protect the maker.

While many of the examples are considered evidence of counter-magic and magical protection, a chapter on the shadow side reveals that some objects appear to be deliberately harmful. Possible sympathetic magical techniques – such as bending pins to ritually kill them – are used as examples to distinguish ordinary domestic "low" magic from the "high" ritual magic used by elites. However, the section on written charms and the occult uses of literacy might offer evidence that these categories are more blurred. These also show how magical protection was deployed within Christian beliefs through the use of biblical texts and references to the Virgin Mary.

As Hoggard acknowledges, some scholars are sceptical that hoards are always deliberately concealed; some might be incidental, forgotten dumping grounds, and the graffiti simply mundane. They recommend exercising caution with magical or ritual explanations for the inexplicable. In response Hoggard documents the high numbers of finds, and maps their similarities as well as their differences, to understand what it might mean to live in a world where supernatural or occult harm was considered a real possibility. He suggests that these artefacts offer

a sense of how people perceived magic and provides evidence for their interactions with it.

The author notes that many examples will have been discarded, and not have reached the archaeological record, and many more remain hidden. Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to consider this detailed account only as a means to understand what these apotropaic practices might have meant to our ancestors. What Hoggard does so well through the Gazetteer is to show continuing concerns about how to manage and respond to uncovering these marks and caches. The detailed catalogue of finds provides insights into the thoughts and actions of the finders. Some carefully replace objects back in their niche, other burn them in fear of occult retribution, while others replace them with updated versions. The notes that accompany reports show how in an ostensibly rational world there remain keen interests and anxieties in the possibility of an enchanted and magically precarious world. And it is this that offers a deeper layer of hidden treasure in this book.

Hoggard concludes by pointing out how much effort went into protecting houses through the creation of these kinds of counter-magic, and uses this to attest to the reality of occult anxieties experienced by earlier populations. This perhaps mirrors the efforts taken to collect and recount reports of revealed apotropaic phenomena, which provides an immersive and fascinating read.

Currently, this book is only published in hardback, and I look forward to a more affordable paperback edition.



A cave is just a cave

Once a myth is launched, its protagonists find it very difficult to let it go

Mysteries of the Tayos Caves

The Lost civilisation where the Andes meet the Amazon

Alex Chionetti

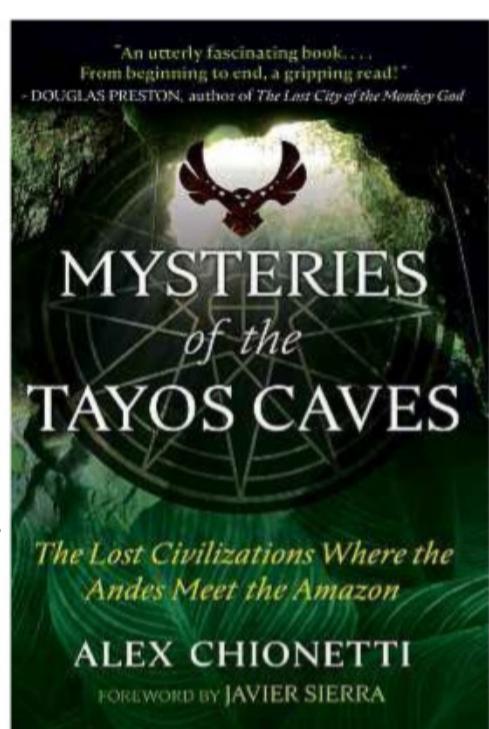
Bear & Company 2019

Pb, 272pp, £16.99, plates, illus, appx, ISBN 9781591433569

The Tayos Caves, a geologically unremarkable, water-worn limestone cave system, are situated within Shuar tribal lands and close to the heavily disputed border between Ecuador and Peru. The Shuar use them as a seasonal larder, descending to collect young birds, the eponymous tayos.

These caves were little known until in 1972 Erich von Däniken popularised a claim by a Hungarian, János Juan Moricz, that hidden within "laser cut" rooms there were golden statues, precious stones and even a well-stocked library of golden tablets written in an ancient script (but very like a proto-Magyar) promising fabulous knowledge.

Chionetti's book is based on original sources, firsthand experience and interviews with most of the characters involved, and so appears to bring together a complete and largely impartial account of the Tayos story – though he is notably hostile and unfair to the large 1976 British and Ecuadorian scientific expedition led by Scottish civil engineer Stan Hall, which included astronaut Neil Armstrong.



The caves are now well-documented, mapped and explored (Hall's expedition mainly) through a number of expeditions from the late 1960s onwards, including recent ones by Chionetti himself. Their detailed description and discussion constitute the bulk of the book, augmented by extensive quotations from the original explorers (other germane documents appear in four appendices).

All visits have failed to find any man-made structure or any really ancient artefact (Chionetti's 28 colour plates are atmospheric rather than informative and clearly belie his claims that the strata have been worked). Despite this lack of evidence, Chionetti remains a fellow traveller but wonders if the ever-elusive treasure only blinks in and out in this dimension. Better known Andean

gold myths (El Dorado and Atahualpa's lost fortune) are dismissed, as, at best, folk memories of the real treasure.

However, alongside this narrative is the fascination in being able to follow (as in a soap opera) the creation and nurturing of a myth, see the decades-long interaction between the half dozen or so main protagonists/antagonists and watch their original claims and counter-claims, friendships and schemes play out, often transmuting from altruistic gold to the basest lead of malice and deceit.

Rob Ixer
★★★

When God had a Wife

The Fall and Rise of the Sacred Feminine in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Lynn Picknett & Clive Prince

Bear & Co 2019

Pb, 326pp, £12.99, notes, bib, ind, ISBN 9781591433705

Most Christians will be shocked, but few biblical scholars will be surprised at much of the content of Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's latest book, though they might quibble with some of their conclusions.

First of all, it's been accepted for many decades that the early Hebrew religion was not monotheistic as Judaism later became – and out of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The early Hebrews or Israelites were henotheistic – or, in the term that Picknett and Prince use throughout, monolatrous: they accepted the existence of other gods, but chose to worship just one. There's clear evidence of this in one of the most quoted passages of the Old Testament, the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). In fact the word used for God in the very first line of the Bible is *elohim*, a plural noun. So far, so straightforward, and entirely uncontroversial, except for fundamentalists.

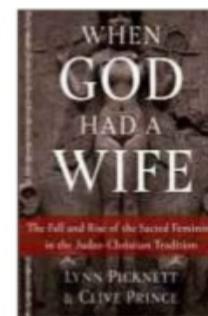
The first chapter of *When God had a Wife* is clear and balanced, contrasting the biblical story and history. So, for example, there is no historical evidence in Egypt of the Exodus; centuries on, David and Solomon "did not rule vast numbers of subjects. They were just chieftains of petty kingdoms, which is why they left little mark on their neighbours' chronicles." Even when there might be some historical basis "it is buried under layers of propaganda, swagger and even imagination". The Old Testament was written and rewritten with the exploits of its heroes exaggerated for religious and political purposes; history, it ain't.

But the main thrust of the book will raise more eyebrows. Picknett and Prince quote scholar after scholar to argue the case that first El and then Jehovah had a consort – or at least that a goddess was

worshipped alongside him. Inscriptions from the 8th century BC ask for a blessing from "Yahweh and his Asherah"; the book of Kings mentions that a statue of Asherah was housed in the temple. Asherah, first proposed as Jehovah's consort as far back as 1949, was not just a matriarchal figure, and not just an idealised mother. "Unlike the much later Virgin Mary," the authors write, "she was a *complete archetype*" – amongst other attributes, she was sexy.

The worship of Asherah does make sense. "As all deities in the ancient Near East were paired, Yahweh should be no exception."

It's when they reach New Testament times that Picknett and Prince become somewhat more speculative. The great fight for orthodoxy early on in the book of Acts is between Peter and Simon Magus, between what was to become Christianity, and Gnosticism. The authors argue not only that Simon was a follower of John the Baptist, but that Jesus was too – and that Simon became his successor. Simon had his partner, "Helen the Harlot"; and so Jesus had his, Mary Magdalene, who was to be demonised for centuries as a prostitute. There is definitely a strong case to be argued that the Magdalene was far more important than she's painted in the Gospels; but it's pushing it way too far, without clear evidence, to assert that "Mary Magdalene emphatically fits the role of the sacred prostitute. Almost certainly she was a priestess who played sexual initiatrix in some kind of *hieros gamos* ritual with Jesus." Dan Brown would love it.



Despite this, *When God had a Wife* is a well-researched book, depending almost entirely for its arguments (if not all of its conclusions) on the scholarship of academics. A shame, then, that Picknett and Prince have to have the usual sneering dig of alternative historians at "the blind spot of many academics", at one point even quoting Graham Hancock in support over scholars. "They just can't cope" with an idea like God having a wife, they say, "especially if it means overturning decades, even centuries of accepted wisdom".

But that, of course, is exactly



what academics do – and it's the work of such scholars which underlies much of this book.

Jay Vickers

★★★★

A Lot of People are Saying

The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy

Nancy L Rosenblum & Russell Muirhead

Princeton University Press 2019

Hb, £22, 211 pp, notes, ind, ISBN 9780691188836

On 4 July 2017, National Public Radio, a liberal broadcaster, put the US constitution online as a series of 100 tweets, and Twitter went a little crazy. A lot of people, many of them Trump supporters, reacted as if NPR was calling for revolution or civil war. For most commentators at the time, the fuss made by the alt-right at the co-opting of their own shibboleths by the lefties at NPR was seen as evidence of the essential wackiness, and irony, of the alt-right position; but some, apparently, saw something more sinister. This (frankly rather comical) furore is the starting point for Rosenblum and Muirhead's meditation on the state of things in the USA, and the board from which they spring into a conjecture, full-blown but fragile, that a new form of conspiracism has arisen, one that threatens the foundations of democracy in a way that classic conspiracy theory never has.

The idea that conspiracy theory is a threat to democracy is hardly new; ever since Popper's *Open Society*, agonised perorations on the damaging, even apocalyptic, effects of a way of thinking most people find quirky rather than dangerous has permeated the thinking of Establishment liberalism. Rosenblum and Muirhead's USP is that they have identified a new species of this perilous beast, one that is even more of a threat because, first, it doesn't bother explaining itself (it simply throws out accusations like weaponised gossip) and, second, its attack on the machinery of government and civil discourse is more open and pernicious than ever before.

The authors claim that the

new conspiracism works its evil by delegitimising the organs of democracy, and disorientating the public so that discourse on government is fatally tainted by a kind of post-truth miasma where mere claims of a conspiracy, without evidence, are considered "true enough" and thus create a kind of mythical version of reality where more or less anything goes. And the architect of this alternative universe, the grand "conspirator-in-chief", is Donald Trump. Trump and his supporters, in this rendition, are out to destroy the fabric of American civil society, and the new version of conspiracy theory is their weapon of choice.

This is an extraordinary claim, and one that clearly requires some extraordinary evidence. Do

Rosenblum and Muirhead make a plausible case for the ongoing destruction of everything right-thinking Americans hold dear? In a word, no. In fact, *A Lot of People are Saying* is, in the main, a thinly veiled attack on the Donald, his supporters, and their way of engaging in politics. It's perfectly understandable that many on the liberal wing of the political spectrum in the USA want to criticise, and even attack, Trump and the travelling circus he brings with him to the American political scene; what's less easy to understand is why anyone should want to clothe their criticism in the garb of an intellectual discovery, a contribution to the burgeoning academic industry that has grown and thrives around the topic of conspiracy theory.

The examples that Rosenblum and Muirhead offer as novel forms of conspiracism are not particularly convincing. Pizzagate, for instance, certainly has an online life that makes it resemble a meme more than a theory; but in essence it is pure, classic conspiracism. The attribution of sexual deviance to those in power is not new; it is an integral part of grand narrative conspiracism. Likewise, passing secret messages via public media, using a code that is decipherable if one knows how to connect the dots, is classic conspiracism. QAnon too is offered as an example of a conspiracism that doesn't bother to explain but simply points and shouts; but this

is to ignore the huge community of proofers and interpreters doing exactly that – explaining what it all means and how it fits in the bigger picture.

A Lot of People are Saying is a disingenuous and ultimately trivial exercise in impassioned, but superficial, argument. The fact that it has triggered something of a debate in the academic community says something about how intellectually robust the study of conspiracy theory actually is. Democracy will survive Donald Trump just as conspiracy theory will survive Rosenblum and Muirhead's definition of it.

Noel Rooney

★★

Sublime Light on the Turin Shroud

The True Origin of a Controversial Mediaeval Relic

Ludo Noens

Aspekt Publishers 2019

Pb, 240pp, £16.99, ind, ISBN 9789463385138

This light, breezily readable theory of the origin of the Turin Shroud's image avoids the scientific controversy that, far from being settled by the 1998 carbon dating analysis that dated the relic to the 13th or 14th centuries, has intensified due to a welter of other scientific tests positioning it either in Jesus's location and era or later. With Shroud science having become extremely confusing to date, this avoidance, it must be stressed, is a plus.

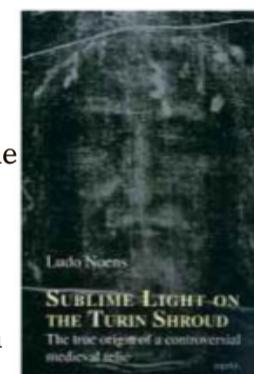
Yet barely is it a book about the Turin Shroud – again, not necessarily a bad thing. Content to accept the 1988 carbon dating result (to the detriment of his own argument when subsequent analysis has undermined that result), Noens tries to square the circle of a mediaeval relic impressed with an inexplicable, preternatural image of a tortured man supposed to represent Christ undergoing resurrection. An "identical replication" then, according to Noens, "not an artistic forgery".

Following a mercifully swift recounting of the Shroud's known history, the real subjects unfold: the "particular psychobiophysical constitution"

of Jesus as revealed by certain cryptic sayings of his and the possible exposure of him and his disciple Paul to mystery cults. Then there is a succinct, clippings-like tour of mystical light phenomena and bio-energy exhibited by humans throughout history to illustrate examples of the titular "sublime light".

Noens covers key anomalies like the Jospice Imprint, which appeared in a Liverpool nursing home in 1981. Les, a 44-year-old terminally-ill Caribbean, told a nurse he had "come here to meet God". Shortly before his death, he sat upright in bed and addressed Christ directly as if envisioning his presence. After Les's death, his mattress cover was found to carry the indelible imprint of a stretched left hand and arm, buttocks, shoulder and part of his face. Expert analysis at the behest of the BBC proved inconclusive. It was thought that urine could have caused the imprint, but exactly how was unclear [see FT51:7-9].

Without completely spoiling the book's revelation about the Shroud, there was an unknown adept in an obscure mystic



movement whose doctrine of divine union through prayer and asceticism caused the "holy energy" of God to transfer onto the cloth. Christ's wounds of passion were painted on afterwards, so no person, either living, dead or in the process of resurrection was harmed in the miracle's creation. The suspected movement slots into the timeline of the Shroud's known early history and the original radiocarbon dating. And the fortean material assembles nicely, albeit to circumstantial effect.

If Noens's research was more thorough, and his presentation more considered, his theory could stand much better because the image's cause remains unknown within consensus science. If only Noens bothered to investigate further, the proposals of several researchers and scientists potentially confirm his theory. Perhaps the main strength of his proposal is that a "miraculous" Shroud can exist without directly involving Jesus. A fresh and suitably fortean conjecture.

Jerry Glover

★★★

Whither truth?

When truth becomes detached from reality, it's a field day for the alt-right, Trump and the Russian purveyors of confusion

Denial – The Unspeakable Truth

Keith Kahn-Harris

Notting Hill Editions, 2018

Hb, 200pp, £14.99, notes, ISBN 9781910749968

The Death of Truth

Michiko Kakutani

William Collins 2018

Hb, 208 pp, £10, notes, bib, ISBN 9780008312787

These short but forensic essays on our “post-truth” age map out a disturbing territory: one in which political and corporate interests manipulate language to validate questionable endgames. The prize, as both authors argue, is the ownership of “truth” and by extension the representation of reality.

In *Denial – The Unspeakable Truth*, Kahn-Harris takes to task Denialism: the human propensity to ignore the self-evident, notably the Holocaust, climate change and evolutionary biology. This becomes an existential threat when individual opinions and beliefs assume a collective and political agenda. Emboldened by audacious self-belief, Denialists view themselves as “truth seekers”, railing against the oppressive agents of scientific and cultural orthodoxy that control our minds. A heady brew of delusion, Kahn-Harris says, when given equal footing within our scientific and cultural institutions.

Considering the psychological origins of Denialism and the mechanics of its appeal amongst a certain mindset, Kahn-Harris looks in detail at how its internal scholarship reinforces group thinking and acts as a bulwark against empirical enquiry. Their claims to scholarship remain ideological smokescreens. Kahn-Harris is at his most compelling in his deconstruction of Denialist claims. They simply fail to follow through on their arguments, he observes, as doing so would mean an acknowledgement of the object denied. He proves the point with gusto by dedicating

one chapter to a rebuttal of Denialist claims using only their own published arguments, and it is with amusement that he recounts an episode in Brazil when Adolf Eichmann, addressing an audience of neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers, adamantly boasts of his involvement – much to their horror!

Later chapters broach an even darker aspect of the human condition; post-Denialism. Recognising the gap between how we should act and how we do act, the idea of cognitive dissonance and the normalisation of unthinkable and unspeakable desires, Kahn-Harris

explores a very recognisable now. Radical post-Denialists such as ISIS/Daesh, for example, can express their views freely within liberal capitalist democracies, quite unlike authoritarian regimes, allowing Denialists to promote their ideology. With the Internet available to everyone, the prognosis appears far from good; yet Kahn-Harris remains optimistic, insisting that it is through education that we may stem the tide of Denialism.

Sharing common ground, Kakutani’s *The Death of Truth* explores the fate of truth in the Trump age. Objectivity, we are told, in political culture, is anathema; with Trump as the avatar of falsity, relativism is the order of the day. Kakutani reflects on how, post-Enlightenment, the category known as “truth” has become a malleable political tool. Considering post-Clinton America, she documents how the financial crash of 2008 has engendered a growth in conspiracy theories and a castigation of liberalism with its espousal of science and experience. Alt-right news agencies such as Fox News and Breitbart have openly voiced

their suspicions that one cannot be both liberal and a “true” American, much to Trump’s acclaim.

Premonitory warnings about irrationalism, Kakutani comments, have not been heeded, leaving a vacuum into which alt-right architects of “reality” are able to draw upon postmodern tropes such as the collapse of linear history and the reification of relative, cultural truths as the new normality. With both language and historical record now deemed unstable, viewpoint is all. “Truth decay” succinctly describes where we appear to be, allowing the world’s dictators the right to define “reality”.

Concluding with a sobering survey of malign agencies and linguistic necromancers, Kakutani considers the Orwellian strategies adopted by many, including Donald Trump. “Fake news”, she argues, is everywhere, an orchestrated and saleable commodity. Whether it is Russia attempting to undermine Western democracy through its many “troll” factories, or the pernicious Internet Research Agency with its “merry-go-round of lies”, or the “updated language” of Trump’s White House administration, propaganda works, she reminds us. The bleak

and concerning landscape traversed by Kakutani cannot be ignored.

With excellent notes and clear and concise referencing both volumes offer the reader a rollercoaster ride through the dystopian theme park of our pre-programmed, algorithm driven and non-consensual world of contingent truth. Not for the faint-hearted!

Chris Hill



The Alien Book

A Guide to Extraterrestrial Beings on Earth

Nick Redfern

Visible Ink, 2019

Pb, 393pp, £16.99, bib, ind, ISBN 9781578596874

The Alien Book is certainly comprehensive, presenting a delightful Carnival of the Aliens from Annunaki to Worm Monsters via Flying Humanoids, Black-Eyed Children and things summoned by Aleister Crowley. In its pages can be found all manner of extraterrestrials, ultraterrestrials and cryptids.

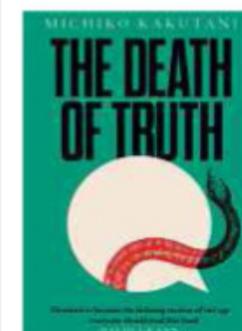
The stories are mainly, but not exclusively, of North American encounters with accounts of the familiar Sasquatch alongside less well-known entities such as the Grinning Man. The UK’s Cannock Chase gets a mention as do Wiltshire crop circles, and

of course no monster manual is complete without a chapter on Nessie. The strength of this book is that it quotes first person testimony at length, letting the witnesses explain what they saw and the effect it had on them. There is little critical analysis, however; Redfern seems content to let the tales speak for themselves, although he does draw the line at cannibalistic orgies in Buckingham Palace.

Myth, legend and anecdotal evidence are woven together into detailed accounts of each alien. Sometimes information appears shoehorned into entries where there is no obvious strong connection: the chapter on Insect Aliens contains a lengthy digression into cattle mutilations. The wide scope encompasses creatures that may not normally be considered as extraterrestrial but which are certainly strange, such as the Welsh flying humanoid Gwrach y Rhibyn, taking the reader into rarely explored territory. Mythology, folklore and witness evidence are all in the mix to good effect.

The serious researcher may find this lightweight, but the general reader will find it informative and hugely entertaining. You may wish to add your own pinch of salt.

Paula Dempsey



THE ALIEN BOOK
A GUIDE TO EXTRATERRESTRIAL BEINGS ON EARTH

NICK REDFERN

Visible Ink

2019

£16.99

ISBN 9781578596874

PB, 393pp

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David V Barrett on keeping stroppy gods under control, translating draconian myths, weirdness in south London, the intricacy of watches, two very different autocratic future histories and a climate change warning

Myth Management

Alex Musson

Uncanny Kingdom 2019

Pb, 236pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781697292015

Turning Darkness into Light

Marie Brennan

Titan Books 2019

Pb, 429pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781789092516

Bus Travel in South London

Chris Roberts

F&M Publications 2019

Pb, 141pp, £9.99, ISBN 9780957213463

The Silver Wind

Nina Allan

Titan Books 2019

Pb, 368pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781789091694

The Second Sleep

Robert Harris

Hutchinson 2019

Hb, 327pp, £20, ISBN 9781786331373

The Divide

Alan Ayckbourn

Drugstore Indian Press/PS Publishing 2019

Pb, 353pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781786364487

Rain

Mary M Talbot & Bryan Talbot

Jonathan Cape 2019

Hb, 160pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781787330481

Teenager Emily Peasbridge is recruited as a trainee at the Bureau of Myth Management, nestled in a world alongside ours. The Bureau's job is to keep a watchful eye on all the gods and demons that mankind has created over the millennia, and to stop them causing any trouble – because myths, once created, are real. The dozen interns are fiercely competitive; only three will be taken on at the end of their probationary period.

Emily and her new room-mate make friends with the Bureau's admin assistant, a seven-foot tall, dog-faced creature, the last of his species. But within weeks of arriving they are caught up in a well-planned attack by some particularly dangerous gods and demons that could (of course) threaten the whole world. *Myth Management* is a delightfully

funny and at times genuinely scary first novel by Alex Musson, founding editor of *Mustard* comedy magazine.

I reviewed the first of Marie Brennan's novels about dragons, *A Natural History of Dragons: A Memoir by Lady Trent*, quite a while back (**FT315:62**). Her latest, *Turning Darkness into Light*, features Lady Trent's granddaughter Audrey, a young and gifted translator of ancient Draconian, who is commissioned to translate some newly-discovered tablets which, she soon finds, cast a whole new light on early Draconian and human mythology, and perhaps history. But it turns out that her patron is involved in anti-Draconian hate groups; Audrey finds herself at the heart of a right-wing conspiracy to discredit human-Draconian relationships.

The plot is compelling, and richly rewarding right up to the powerful conclusion; but what really catches the attention is the detail of academic research, especially the problems of interpreting sometimes fragmentary myths in an ancient tongue – and the professional infighting and chicanery amongst ambitious academics.

Chris Roberts's collection of short stories, *Bus Travel in South London*, is a fascinating mix of the down-to earth and the magical. The stories feature very normal working-class south Londoners, experiencing poverty, teenage street gangs, football urban myths, racial prejudice, old age and death. But then many of the stories, still rooted in street reality, are transformed into wonderfully quirky tales of weather witches, a séance conversation with a Victorian boxer, angels on buses, a delightful new version of the Queen Rat one-eye-grey story, and a literal trouser-snake monster in the iconic wasteland of the Heygate Estate near Elephant & Castle. The author clearly knows south London inside out; the title is because each story is linked, one way or another, to a bus route – or in a couple of cases, to a bus itself. Rarely for a self-published book, this deserves taking up by a proper publisher.

The Silver Wind is a collection of half a dozen linked stories by Nina Allan, who has become a name to watch

out for over the last couple of years. Her previous novels have involved the mutability of fact and fiction, history and myth, reality and storytelling. In these beautifully told stories relationships between characters change between stories; a sibling in one story might be long dead in another, or might be a friend or a lover; friends and relatives change places. At the heart of each of the stories are remarkable hand-made watches whose complex mechanism, the rotating tourbillon actually invented around 1795 by horologist Abraham-Louis Breguet, might – or might not – enable time travel. Allan's research is impeccable. The intricate details of watch-making are simply explained and fascinating; the relationships between the characters, including an apprentice horologist and an apparently timeless beach entertainer, are warming and real; and the time travel? That would be too much of a spoiler...

Robert Harris is no stranger to alternative history; his first novel was the Nazi-winning *Fatherland*. *The Second Sleep* is set in a post-apocalyptic future, when Britain has reverted to a quasi-medieval state dominated by the Church, which bans any form of technology and forbids any research into the past or collection of past artefacts. It's basically the scenario of Keith Roberts's classic *Pavane*, written half a century ago, and the opposite of Walter M Miller's classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, where monks preserved the lost scientific knowledge of the past. But Harris's novel isn't in the same league.

Fr Christopher Fairfax is a young priest sent to a small village to conduct the funeral of its long-serving priest; browsing in his study he is shocked to find heretical books about the past and journals of the Society of Antiquaries, as well as illegal and blasphemous objects from the past, including plastic straws, cutlery – and a mobile phone. His discoveries over the next few days bring him more knowledge about the past than he, or anyone, is allowed to have, as he tries to uncover what the old priest was investigating before his death. It's well enough written, but the concept is hardly new; the background idea is a great deal more interesting than the rather weak plot; the title refers to

the mediæval habit of getting up in the middle of the night, but this is barely relevant to the story; and the somewhat arbitrary ending breaks a cardinal rule of fictional narrative.

Sir Alan Ayckbourn is renowned for his many plays. *The Divide* is, unbelievably, his first novel. A century ago, when a disease was wiping out men, The Preacher decreed that men and women should live in separate communities with almost no interaction. If they do meet, under very formal circumstances, they must wear masks to protect the men from infection from women. In a tightly controlled women's village near Salisbury, a female couple are bringing up their children; the girl will stay in the village, while the boy will go through the Divide into the men's community at 18. This fundamentalist future fable is told mainly through the diaries of the two children as they grow up (their voices, from five to 18, are spot on), and also through the minutes of the village council, where over the years Orthodox councillors gradually lose influence to Progressive ones. Times are beginning to change. But extracts from The Preacher's *Book of Certitude* are clear: men and women must be kept apart for the good of both. So in a society where heterosexual relationships are seen as the ultimate deviancy, what happens if a boy and girl fall in love?

Bryan Talbot is perhaps best known for his alternative world graphic novel character Luther Arkwright. *Rain* is a very different piece of work. Written by Mary M Talbot and charmingly illustrated by Talbot, it's the story of the growing but often troubled relationship between two young women. Over several seasons Mitch introduces Cath to the beauty and wildness of the Yorkshire moors – and to how they are being despoiled by human intervention. It's not just plants and animals; burning heather and digging ditches damages the soil itself, destroying natural drainage. Climate change brings heavy rain – and with the damage done to the moors, Mitch's village, and her home, flood catastrophically. The story is inspired by the floods in Hebden Bridge at the end of 2015. It may not be farcical, but it's a timely lesson we all need to learn, if we want our planet to have a future.

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From the great outside

Richard Stanley is back with his first feature film in over 25 years, a blistering adaptation of one of HP Lovecraft's finest stories that brings full-on cosmic horror to the cinema screen



Color Out of Space

Dir Richard Stanley, US 2019
On UK release from 28 February

It's hard to believe that the last time Richard Stanley managed to complete a conventional feature film was way back in 1992, with the wonderful *Dust Devil*. After having been unceremoniously kicked off the Marlon Brando/Val Kilmer-sabotaged *Island of Doctor Moreau* in 1995 (see the documentary *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley's Island of Dr Moreau* for the full story of this nightmare production) he has kept busy with numerous shorts and documentaries (as well as writing scripts and the occasional FT article), but his unexpected return to mainstream filmmaking stands as both a triumphant comeback and arguably the most convincing Lovecraft film adaptation ever made.

"The Colour Out of Space"

In the end, the bleakness of Lovecraft's vision remains in place

is classic Lovecraft, a focused blast of cosmic horror in which a meteorite falls to Earth near Arkham; it heralds the start of the 'strange days', in which first a farmer's land, and then his family, are changed and ultimately destroyed by this "stony messenger from the stars" and the forces, quite indifferent to human concerns, it unleashes.

Stanley ditches the literary devices and evasions of Lovecraft's original, in which the reader never directly meets Gardner and his family but gets the whole story at third-hand from the narrator, who had it in turn from an aged neighbour who still remembers

the tragedy of 40 years earlier. Instead, we see events unfold in the present tense and from the point of view of the Gardners themselves, a sympathetically dysfunctional clan who have decamped from the big city to the backwoods. Theresa (Joely Richardson) is recovering from cancer, paterfamilias Nathan (Nicolas Cage) is raising alpacas, and teenage daughter Lavinia (Madeleine Arthur) practises Wicca – a nicely ironic update to Lovecraft's witch-haunted Puritan world.

Adding relatable characters was a clear prerequisite to rendering the story filmable, and updating it to the present day was a wise decision: too many Lovecraft adaptations tend to get bogged down in literal-minded antiquarianism.

Cage turns in one of his trademark bonkers performances, but here, as a slightly eccentric, can-do patriarch trying to keep his shit and his family together

as his world goes completely mad around him, it's a convincing and at times moving one. Early in the film he somewhat defensively describes his much-maligned alpacas as "the animals of the future", which seems purely comical at first; given the constant visual presence of the toy dinosaurs favoured by the younger son – animals of the past and victims of another alien visitor from the "great outside" – it's a line that becomes increasingly chilling as the inhuman evolution set in motion by the meteorite spreads like a cancer and affects everything around it.

Problems can arise when movies have to show what stories often only suggest: Lovecraft's indescribable "cosmic chromaticism", "unlike any colours of the normal spectrum", can't really be represented on film; instead, Stanley opts for a palette of unearthly pinks and purples that ripple through the visible world before eventually transforming it entirely. Lovecraft is typically oblique in treating the physical changes that affect the Gardners, whereas Stanley embraces a full-on body-horror aesthetic (and old-school practical effects). This works well for the most part – there's a highly apt tip of the hat to John Carpenter's visceral version of *The Thing* – and only on one occasion shades a bit too far into B-movie territory.

In the end, the bleakness of Lovecraft's vision remains firmly in place, but Stanley's introduction of a human – indeed, a deeply personal – element allows, if not for hope, then at least for emotional resonance and a very un-Lovecraftian sense of empathy.

David Sutton



THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.peterlaws.co.uk)

Under the Shadow

Dir Babak Anvari, UK/Jordan/Qatar/Iran 2016
Second Sight Films, £23.99 (Limited Edition Blu-ray)



Sea Fever

Dir Neasa Hardiman, Ireland/US/UK 2019
In cinemas and to buy from 24 April

Magic

Dir Richard Attenborough, USA 1978
Second Sight Films, £13.99 (Blu-ray)

HP Lovecraft famously said that “the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

Hence horror movies can add instant menace simply by dragging the viewer into an unusual landscape or scenario. *Under The Shadow* does that by taking what could have been just another straight-to-video demon movie and setting it in war-torn, 1980s Tehran. It’s here we meet medical student Shideh, who longs to be a doctor like her husband but, due to her involvement with left-wing student groups, is barred from further study. Feeling hurt and useless she mopes at home, just as an unexploded bomb hits the roof of their apartment block. That’s stressful enough... but soon a strange demon starts enticing her daughter to the upstairs room where the bomb hit. I’ve seen many a demon-lurking-in-a-corner movie, but this demon, a *djinni* no less, looks so uniquely disturbing that I was creeped out.

The setting, rich with subtext, is what makes the film feel so fresh in its approach to subjects like war, gender, religion, and pride. If the exact same story had been set in contemporary America I might have shrugged; yet placing it

From the start, it's hard to work out which one of them is wooden and which one is flesh

during the Iran-Iraq war floods the screen with a sense of the new. That’s not to say the setting is a gimmick – far from it: it’s just a reminder of how often horror defaults to American suburbia.

Irish thriller *Seafever* isn’t quite as ambitious, but it does drag the screams way offshore and shove



them on a boat. Connie Nielsen plays Freya, a marine biology student who doesn’t like people. That’s bad news when she winds up marooned on a fishing trawler while conducting research. Worse still, a bizarre, luminescent parasite starts infecting the water supply. Yes, it feels like *The Thing-on-sea* at times, but that’s a lazy comparison. *Seafever* is its own movie. The Lovecraftian parasites are particularly effective, and one scene made me straight out gasp. For the most part, it’s a slow burn, but writer director Neasa Hardiman steers a solid, spooky ship here. It’s a tense, squirm-inducing chiller that left me feeling nervous in the shower.

Finally we have the Blu-ray release of a 1970s classic set in that incredibly niche corner of showbiz, the foul-mouthed ventriloquist circuit. Baby-faced Anthony Hopkins plays Corky, a magician who can’t seem to catch a break – until he gets a gimmick: a psychotic-looking dummy called Fats. The little chap just loves effing and jeffing, and (for some reason) this catapults Corky to stardom. Yet as the pressures of the big time mount, Corky starts spotting Fats from the corner of his eye – did he move, just then? And when he speaks, is that my voice, or his? *Magic* scared a lot of people, first time round, particularly kids. I liked it and I adore the Jerry Goldsmith score, but despite some chilling moments, there’s something a little off about it. Hopkins is detached from the outset... perhaps too much. We don’t warm to him. He feels like a vacant body himself, waiting for someone to move his mouth and raise his eyebrows. From the start, it’s hard to work out which one of them is wooden and which one is flesh....which, now that I think about it, may be precisely be the genius of *Magic*.

So there you have it, three films which gottle-of-gear... hey... wait... who said that?

Little Joe

Dir Jessica Hausner, UK 2019
On UK release from 21 February

The titular Joe is a genetically modified plant, a variant of a previous experiment developed to allow growths to be more durable so that they don’t have to be watered regularly. The side effect of the new strain is a lack of scent from the flowers; a new modification rectifies this, but has also developed a curious by-product: if carefully looked after and kept at the ideal temperature, the plants’ scent makes people happy.

Overseeing this operation is senior plant breeder and single mother Alice (Emily Beecham) who, together with her colleagues Chris (Ben Whishaw) and Bella (Kerry Fox), has put the plant into mass production. Things seems to be working well, but when Alice’s dog is trapped in the lab overnight and comes into contact with the plants’ pollen there is an additional and more troubling side effect: to all intents and purposes the dog is perfectly normal, but Bella has it put down because she no longer recognises it as her own. At this stage no connection is made by the team between the experiments and the fate of Bella’s pet. Alice takes the unusual and rule-breaking step of taking one of the strange anemone-like plants home to her teenage son Joe (Kit Connor); together they name it ‘Little Joe’. Joe, exposed to the plant at home, starts to grow distant from his mother. Alice puts this down to teenage hormones, but Bella warns Alice that there is something amiss with the plants they have created. Although Alice dismisses her concerns, she grows increasingly worried about how sentient the ‘Little Joes’ really are.

The opening shot of Jessica Hausner’s film has the camera slowly tracking across rows of unusual brightly coloured plants – almost fairytale-like in their appearance – in a sterile laboratory setting under harsh overhead lights, while veteran composer Teiji Ito’s (he wrote music for Maya Deren’s experimental films in the 1940s) jarring, discordant soundtrack announces, out of nowhere, an immediate threat of danger. It’s



both an impressive beginning and accurate shorthand for how *Little Joe* is to play out. This is an arid film where everything is suggested rather than spelled out; it's also the Austrian director's first feature in English, a language she finds unsentimental and therefore fitting for the film's clinical atmosphere.

It's a credit to the cast that all of them underplay their roles, reflecting the subtlety and ambiguity of the story. Beecham (whose performance won her Best Actress at Cannes) and Fox, who in a more straightforward sci-fi flick would be relegated to 'hysterical women' roles, are here allowed to manage their anxieties in a non-judgemental way. Wishaw and Connor are both to some extent child/men; Wishaw resists the classic sci-fi alpha male in favour of something quiet but determined.

Little Joe is a film concerned with identity and how the familiar can become uncanny. It's also about the battle between science and the unknown, as well as being a story of survival. Chris's protection of the plants at any cost mirrors the experiment's own need to thrive and to eradicate the weaker, earlier strain. Hausner (who directed the stylish psychological horror *Hotel* in 2004) is clearly aware of the film's influences, whether the weighty (Darwinian theory, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) or the pop-cultural (the paranoia of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and maybe even Roger Corman's *The Little Shop of Horrors*, although with much greater subtlety than either), but these influences haven't stopped Hausner creating a film that is truly her own; one that is equally strange and unusual, and indeed otherworldly.

Daniel King



8 Days

Dir Stefan Ruzowitzky & Michael Krummenacher, Germany 2019
RLJE International, £14.99 (DVD)

A large asteroid is about to hit the Earth, right in the heart of Europe. Although all of Europe will be destroyed or made uninhabitable – we're never really given the details of the expected devastation – the

focus is entirely on Germany; all the action (apart from an abortive attempt to escape on a train) is in Berlin. Many attempt to flee the country, though crossing the border, if you're able to, won't bring any safety. There's nowhere to run to.

Over the last few months the German government has built huge bunker complexes for politicians and the elite, but despite fake promises of allocating places by lottery, the vast majority of the population have no hope. Some people seek solace in church; others turn to a hippie messiah; some indulge in sex, drink and drugs; many become violent. A few have built their own personal bunkers, and fight and kill to keep others out. Civilisation breaks down.

There's nothing particularly new in any of this.

A German TV series with English subtitles, *8 Days* devotes one episode to each of the last eight days before the 37 mile (60km)-wide asteroid hits, following a few groups of people in fragmentary scenes. There's a nice middle-class family of four; a minor politician and his heavily pregnant girlfriend; an old man drinking himself into oblivion; a paranoid and violent father who locks his daughter in his bunker; a lone cop who still believes in doing his job when all his colleagues have given up on law-and-order.

If I hadn't been reviewing it I wouldn't have bothered watching beyond the confusing and frankly dull first episode. There is little plot development over the series; the episodes are almost interchangeable as people display nastiness, anger, selfishness, brutality and complete disregard for each other. There are several story streams, but nothing to wonder about and discover as they progress – just lots of people being thoroughly unpleasant. By the sixth or seventh episode, the links between the various groups of characters have become clear, so there's more of a coherent narrative – just a bit too late.

But the soundtrack by David Reichelt is stunning: dark, portentous, powerful, almost operatic. Buy the CD for wonderful doom music.

David V Barrett



DOCUMENTARY

WITNESS OF ANOTHER WORLD

Available on demand from Amazon, Vimeo, Google Play and other platforms

Documentary filmmaker Alan Stivelman sets out to understand the nature of the UFO phenomenon by visiting Juan Pérez, a reclusive abductee who lives in a rural part of Argentina. Not the most obvious way to start an exploration of this subject, but it does act as a framing device to set off this adventure into one dimension of the cloudy world of ufology.

The film unfolds with the camera simply following Juan's day-to-day activities, allowing him time to open up and say more about his life story. We see he has a very simple home in the countryside, where he hunts for food.

Even now Juan has strong feelings about the encounter he had when he was a boy, and it seems to have dictated the rest of his existence. Memories of it continue to haunt him. Never has someone looking to the skies with tears in his eyes been better filmed.

The footage is interspersed by comments from local shamans and a clairvoyant who talk about his encounter in terms of the ancestral spirits and origin myths, whereas Jacques Vallée jets in to interpret it in terms of multiverses and UFOs coming from a fourth dimension.

Through a hypnosis session conducted by a psychiatrist, Juan relives his experience from the morning of 6 September 1978, when he sees a spinning UFO land in front of him. Climbing a ladder, he looks inside the craft where he sees a little boy cooking meat; a glass panel blocks his way and he goes outside, where he sees his dead grandfather. This account differs from the original reports, which say he saw a small robot cutting up bones inside the vehicle, and a cylindrical, helmeted being who was connected by a breathing apparatus to the object. Mentioning the presence of his grandfather puts this more in the realms of a visitation from the spirit world than a visitation from another planet.

Witness of Another World doesn't explore these questions, and it does not look at alternative, more mundane explanations for Juan's encounter. He mentions that his horse was injured during the incident and died later; we are not told how much later or what it died from, and nor is the type of injury mentioned. One explanation could be that Juan and his horse could have had an accident on this foggy morning and the UFO story acted as a psychological mask to deal with the trauma and act as an explanation that would not bring punishment from his father. That is probably more reasonable than turning Juan into a magical person touched by ancestral/astronaut gods from heaven/the fourth dimension.

The film is not interested in such details; instead it is a poetic, empathetic revelation of one lonely man's life. It takes us on a journey towards the purification of Juan's soul, one which will help him understand and come to terms with the Black Zone that threatens us all. As such, it provides a beautiful and powerful insight into how people can be profoundly affected by a 'UFO encounter'.

Nigel Watson ★★★★☆



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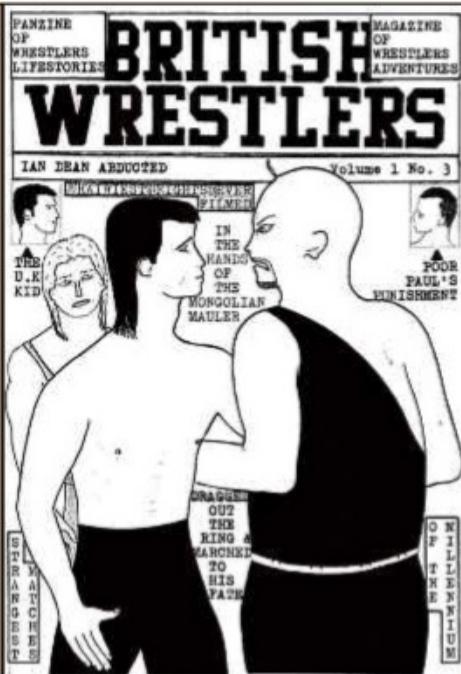


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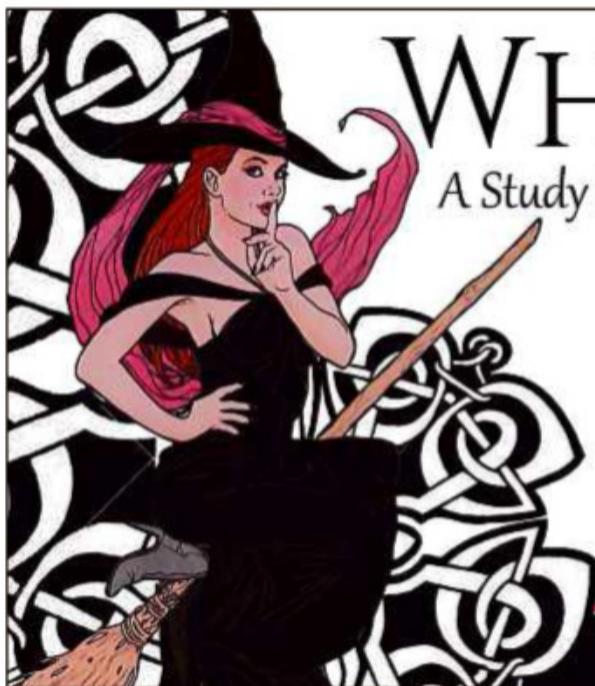


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LETTERS

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Mini aliens

Further to the discussion about mini aliens on film, a couple of years ago there was an advert based on just this premise – although I have no recollection of the product/service being advertised. In it, a ‘typical’ saucer-head gets notification of the imminent arrival on Earth of an alien delegation, and sets off in pursuit. We see the aliens in their craft, but at no point does the audience have any cause to think that they are anything but human-sized until they land and leave their craft, their leader starts to declaim in their language, and a wheel of the investigator’s campervan runs right over them. The ad still gets shown from time to time.

Louise Bath
Halesowen, West Midlands

Small is better

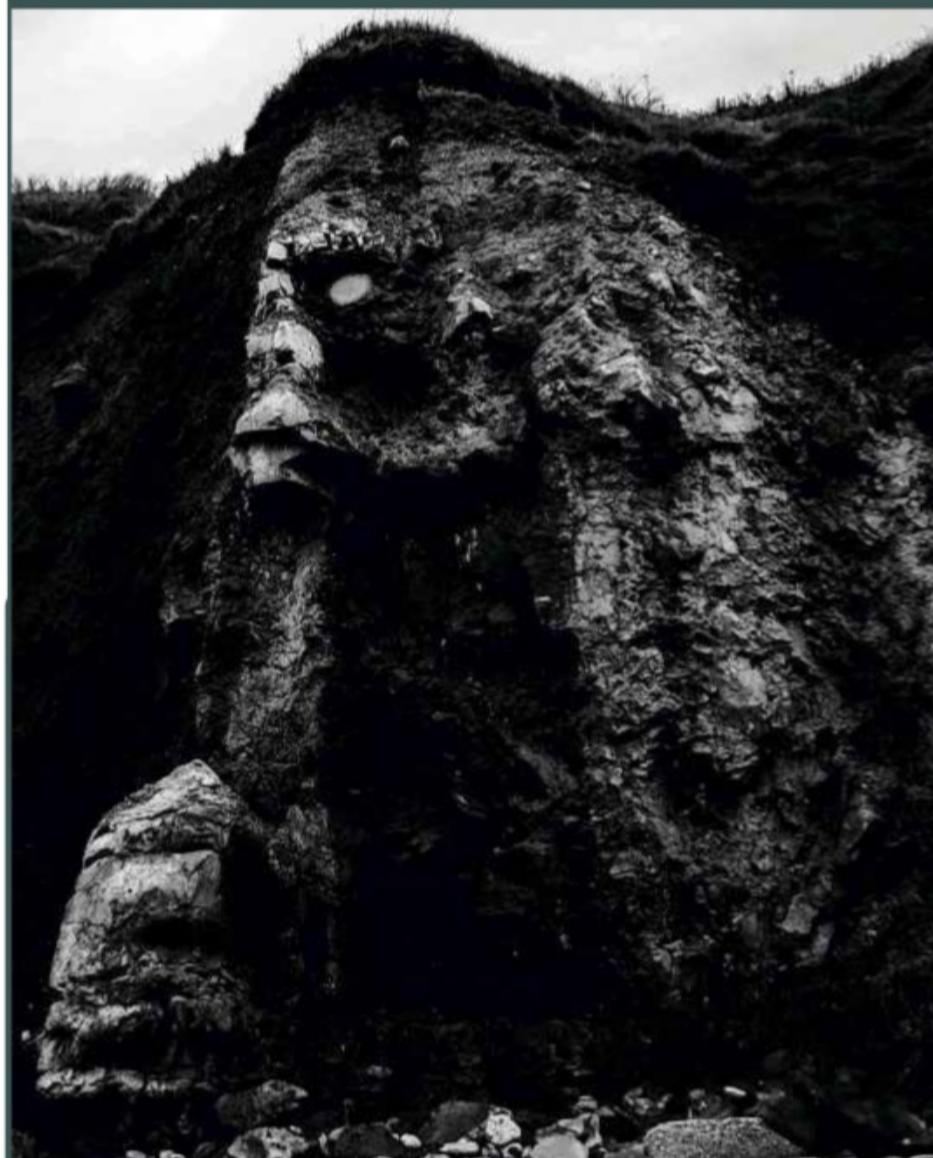
Hugh Henry's letter about tiny astronauts [FT385:70] brings to mind the Genesis song *Get 'Em Out By Friday*: “This is an announcement from Genetic Control. It is my sad duty to inform you of a four-foot restriction on humanoid height... It's said now that people will be shorter in height, they can fit twice as many in the same building site. They say it's alright.”

Dr A Noel Kisor
Hawk Point, Missouri

Kent UFOs

There have been many reports of UFO sightings over the Romney Marsh area of Kent over the past few years. These have often been incidents of strange lights in the night sky and even mysterious cases of sheep mutilations from the 1990s onwards, rather like the reports of cattle mutilations from previous decades. My late and very much levelheaded grandfather often mentioned seeing strange lights in the sky when he lived in the area for nearly 30 years, and his accounts have been matched by many of the locals. One such witness is Paul O' Grady of *Lily Savage* fame, who was interviewed in the *Daily Mirror* some years back and stated un-

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Robin Horsley found this ape during a walk along Crimdon beach, Co. Durham.

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equivocally that UFOs were ‘real’ as he had seen them on several occasions near his home in the town of Hythe.

Phil Brand
London

GnortsMr-alien

I was delighted to learn from Phenomenomix that Neil Armstrong (Protectus Diaboli) backwards is “GnortsMr-ALIEN!” [FT388:79]. Because, of course, ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response – and TSMR is near as dammit in your unsettling and borborygmus onomatopoeia. Aficionados of Seth Macfarlane’s

American Dad will remember the tubby young man Barry wishing doom on Lord ASMR that he might “know fear”, and I echo the sentiment.

Carl Bradbury [FT388:71] will be pleased to learn that Harry Potter also shows up in a Monty Python sketch as one of the first people to be turned into a Scotsman by Blancmanges from beyond the Andromeda Galaxy.

Finally, I would like to big it up for miniature aliens with regard to the film *The Day Time Ended*, in which one of their craft is affectionately called “The Vacuum Cleaner of Doom” by the fans, even though it can float in and

out of this dimension. Let us pray this technology remains beyond us for our vacuum cleaners.

James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Bishop's Torpedo

During my highly educational college days, my fellow students and I enjoyed using fireworks to detonate large trash bags filled with various explosive gasses from the chemistry department. A bag of hydrogen, when hit by a firework, would catch fire and gently burn with a sort of slowly spreading and almost hypnotic combustion, such as can be seen in the eerie footage of the Hindenburg disaster. This correlates quite well with the distinctive burning of the Bishop's Torpedo [FT387:44-51], with its “tongues of fire issuing from spots on the surface” or Mme Espert's sighting of a flaming ball in which “an opening appeared like a hole in burning paper”.

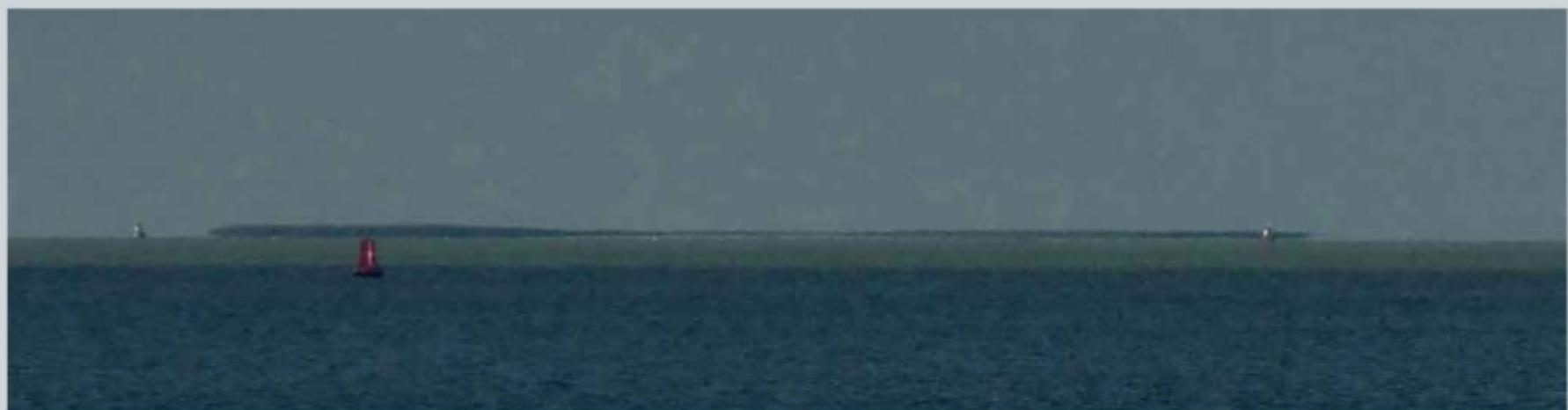
Shough and Van Utrecht write: “One would expect such an explosion to have immediately destroyed a fragile balloon” – but hydrogen balloons on fire certainly do not explode. Might I suggest that the initial loud explosion that attracted the attention of the Bishop was the launching of a large firework, perhaps a mortar, which then set the balloon on fire? The temptation to launch long-hoarded fireworks at floating bags of hydrogen can grow extreme in the days building up to our Fourth of July celebrations. I will also add that the detonation of a large trash bag filled with a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen gas produced the loudest explosion I'd ever heard, and a shock wave visible in all the large trees 50 yards away.

David Drexler
Portland, Oregon

Down south

I noticed a geographical error in the article “No Sympathy for the Devil” [FT388:16]. It stated: “Up the road, at Clarksdale, Robert Johnson was said to have made a pact with the Devil in return

LETTERS



Mystery island or mirage?

I took this picture on 9 July 2019 from Sheerness in Kent looking north and east toward the North Sea. I'd guess whatever I was looking at was at least 10 and possibly 15 miles away (16-24km). Shoeburyness and the beginnings of Maplin Sands, which is nearer, is eight miles (12.8km) away. If this is a sand bank appearing at low tide (the tidal range of the Thames here is about 17ft/5m) then, at that distance, this must have been rearing at least 25-35ft (8-11m) above the water. A similar image can, apparently, be seen from the Broomway (the ancient track that cuts out into the North Sea from Foulness

Island) – a substantial-looking structure, sitting on the horizon.

Are these possibly the trial foundations that were built for Maplin Airport? There isn't much available about this online save the following comment: "In 1973, construction started on the grey-brown Essex mudflats. A gravel 'trial bank' 300m [1,000ft] long was erected, to see if an airport could withstand the North Sea storms and deep estuary quicksands..." If it is this, then, given the scale and distances involved in assessing this image, the foundations appear to have been more extensive than anyone has admitted – presumably because the cancellation of the airport at Foulness in 1974 involved

writing off a lot of expenditure that the civil servants and politicians preferred to keep quiet about.

The odd thing is, considering its size and location, it's an obvious navigation hazard. Despite that, it isn't marked on maps and has to be, like Orford Ness (and at one point the Post Office Tower) one of the oddest pieces of land in the country. It's "there", but not there.

So, is the explanation mundane or exotic... do we have a mirage, or a mystery island, or a forgotten part of Dogger Land, or a Boris Island before Boris? Can we expect the Chinese to build a naval base and airfield here?

Simon Matthews, By email

for outstanding guitar skills." Clarksdale is in Mississippi and that is south of Memphis. Therefore, it should be "Down the road".

Gregory Sumrall
Biloxi, Mississippi

St Thomas Becket

Further to Alan Murdie's article on the ghost of St Thomas Becket [FT387:20-23], I have come across a little-known connection with Herefordshire. While researching the archaeology and folklore of the Roman town of Kenchester – or Magnis to give it its Latin name – situated a few miles from the city of Hereford, I discovered a Becket reference. There is now nothing to be seen of the Roman town, the remains of which lie under fields. Some ruins were still visible up until the early 19th century, but these had disappeared by the time excavations in 1912-13 and 1924-25 were carried out, with Alfred Watkins of 'ley' fame carrying out the

photographic duties on both occasions.

One of the last ruins to disappear was the remains of a bathhouse consisting of brickwork within which was a niche, perhaps meant for a statue of a deity. The latter feature was known locally as the Fairy King's Chair or Throne, and was about 5ft (1.5m) high and 2-3ft (60-90cm) broad, but it was also known as Becket's Chair. Furthermore, there was a local legend attached to a nearby roadside pool, which the 17th century antiquary William Camden reported was "abounding with fine trout" and attested that the locals believed that "Thomas Becket often appears" in the pool. However, why he is associated with Kenchester is a mystery. The only connection I can find is that Hereford Cathedral possesses a reliquary containing a Becket relic. Can anyone throw any further light on this?

Eric Fitch
Hereford

Cat's memory

Every night, at precisely the same time, the cat comes into the living room, climbs onto a stack of storage boxes, and stares at the side of the television. Once there, nothing distracts him. This has been happening for many months. Recently, a housemate revealed that one night at about this time, many months earlier, they had inserted a DVD disc into the television's built-in DVD player. The cat, they said, was transfixed by this and sat for hours watching the slot into which the disc disappeared. It seems that this particular event, and the particular time it occurred, is now indelibly imprinted onto the cat's memory.

Stefan Badham
Portsmouth, Hampshire

Penda's Fen

In response to Helen Barrell's letter ['Angel or Demon', FT387:75] concerning the possible influence of Jacob Epstein's statue

'The Archangel Lucifer' on the winged figure in the Clarke-Rudkin film *Penda's Fen*, Barrell's suspicion is confirmed by actor Spencer Banks on page 94 of the phenomenal new collection of essays, *Of Mud & Flame: The Penda's Fen Sourcebook* (Strange Attractor, 2019).

Eric Hoffman
Vernon, Connecticut

Rear Turret?

I very much enjoy Jenny Randles's UFO columns, especially those about military aviation-related sightings described in the recent series 'Scramble, UFO!' These are probably the most persuasive accounts, particularly in light of the recent Tic-Tac UFO circus the US Navy has owned up to. The account from 1953 [FT388:31] had my rapt attention, until I got to the bit where Cyril Townsend Withers described observing a UFO from the gun turret position. The English Electric Canberra didn't have a gun turret in either tail, ventral or dorsal



positions. Some variants carried an under fuselage pack with four forward-facing Hispano cannons or under wing hard-points for assorted ordnance, but none had provision for a 'tail end charlie'. The Canberra was designed to be faster and fly higher than any Soviet interceptor – so why bother with defensive armaments? It may seem a minor point, but this sort of detail undermines the credibility of any UFO sighting account. The North American B45, which was in service until 1959, bears a superficial similarity to the Canberra and has a rear turret position, but any flight crew – no matter how long ago they flew – wouldn't mistake a Canberra for a B45. The devil, and sometimes the truth, is in the detail.

The rear looking RADAR is also a bit of a problem; I don't believe any variants had a rear RADAR coverage, only side and forward.

Barry FitzGerald
Dorchester, Dorset

Even if Cyril Townsend Withers was confused (perhaps due to his terminal illness or the fact that the event is alleged to have happened 33 years prior to the retelling) and was instead referring to the forward-facing bomb-aimer's Perspex nose cone fitted to non-prototype versions, it would have been impossible to get a rearward view from such a position. If the entire portion of the account concerned with observing the "round silvery" object following the aircraft cannot be relied upon, where does that leave the rest of the story?

Alistair Moffatt
Totnes, Devon

Jenny Randles responds:
Here is a transcription of what Cyril Townsend Withers actually said in that part of the interview: "We were a secret flight and because of the importance of our job that day we were given cleared air space. I knew this was something important and, of course, that it could have been an enemy aircraft. So I clambered into the rear gun turret to investigate. Sure enough, there was an object trailing behind. It was round and silvery, reflecting sunlight like a

giant mirror. I told the pilot (by mike) to increase speed. Although we got to 225 knots, the object stuck with us so I recommended 'a big radius turn' in order to shake it. The object vanished from the radar now because the system was only operating in a rearward-facing mode. However, the object was not visually absent for long. Within moments it was dead ahead. As we came out of the turn, we flew towards the glinting object and closed the gap very fast. For about 30 seconds we were on a collision course. During this period we had a close-up view."

At the time of the interview, there was no access to MoD specifications, especially on aircraft in such a secret test, and the witness had died before I was free to report the matter, so could never clarify further. However, I did research all of the Canberra specs and discovered that there was no mention of a rear-facing gun turret in any of them, only a forward-facing view. This was not a normal flight by a normal aircraft, so how they operated during subsequent service is not necessarily relevant. The plane was newly delivered, not yet fitted out. It was chosen to conduct a specialist radar experiment. Something could well have been jemmed up temporarily for the duration of these tests to make a rear view visible, then removed before the aircraft entered actual service.

Perhaps he was calling it out of habit a gun turret when it was some other visual space at the rear that had been created to offer that perspective? Obviously, all these years later it is not possible to know the truth for certain. Perhaps someone reading this might have inside knowledge of those 1950s tests that could help clarify this matter.

Of course, it is possible the witness was confused by his medication or was deliberately conflating details – or just lying. But given that his service details check out, it would be an odd thing to do so late in life. I am as sure as it is possible to be that he was sincerely reporting something that he was desperate to get off his chest before he died.

Ghost, or no ghost

I read *Conjuring up Philip* back in the mid-Seventies and the FT article [FT383:60-61] reminded that I still had a 1965 Picador paperback of Frank Baker's *Miss Hargreaves* (first published in 1940). The connection is that the protagonists in this tale invent an eccentric stroppy lady called Miss Hargreaves who comes to life with comic and unfortunate results. Its style is dated but it's still worth reading and makes me think that those who were conjuring Philip were lucky not to have got what they wished for.

Ron Gardner
Upton Snodsbury, Worcestershire

Editor's note: Dame Margaret Rutherford starred in the stage adaptation of Miss Hargreaves at the Royal Court Theatre in 1952.

Jupiter's moons

Over 30 years ago, I was working as a window cleaner in Liverpool. Going from house to house collecting my window cleaning money, I knocked at a door and an elderly lady asked me to wait while she went for her purse. It was the middle of winter and pitch dark, which gave me the opportunity to observe Jupiter. On returning the lady remarked on how large and beautiful that star was. I corrected her, saying it wasn't a star but a planet. She was amazed and told me that she'd always assumed it was a huge star with little twinkles around it. Little twinkles around it, I enquired? Yes, she said, I can see them now four (she dithered a bit) yes, four little pin-pricks

surrounding it. I was dumbfounded – here was a lady in her 80s telling that she was observing the four main moons of Jupiter – Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. Surely this wasn't possible...

On arriving home I pulled out one of Patrick Moore's books on astronomy and searched for

naked eye observations of Jupiter's moons. Moore states that only a handful of people have ever claimed to have observed all four moons, and that even these claims are disputed. Two, three maybe, but never four.

The next day I saw the lady walking towards me and I told her about Moore's book. She was adamant about observing all the "little pin pricks" and tried to prove it by pointing to a parked car up the road. The road was very long and at the top of it I could just make out a car parked up there. A mere speck. With that she read out a registration number and I made a note of it, smiling. She gave me a cheeky grin and trotted off home. It was a long walk, but she was absolutely dead on. Amazing. Truly amazing.

Later on she told me that when she was a little girl (must have been in the 1920s or 30s) her schoolteacher had discovered her amazing talent and had persuaded her parents to let her attend a research establishment up north. A small fee and all expenses were paid for, but after several visits her father refused to go there. He just thought it wasn't right for his little girl to go through these procedures. This establishment persisted but to no avail – her father wasn't having it. They finally gave up.

She went on to say that when she was young she could see far more than she could see now. I asked her what on earth could she see, "Stephen," she said, "I could see everything. Everything."

Stephen Collier
Liverpool



LETTERS

Burnt Toast

The notion that you might smell burnt toast before an epileptic seizure [Mythconceptions FT386:21] has a very Canadian source. In a series of public service announcements designed to teach Canadians about Canadian history that aired in the early 1990s was a dramatised re-enactment of the research of 1930s neurosurgeon Dr Wilder Penfield and a patient who smelled burnt toast before suffering a seizure. Penfield was able to use electroreceptive techniques to cure some forms of seizure, and is lauded as a Canadian hero. In turn, Canadians turned it into vernacular – smelling burnt toast meant that you were being crazy: *Person A*: [says something nutty]. *Person B*: Are you [or am I] smelling burnt toast right now?

This is a very common vernacular that most middle-aged and older Canadians would understand and it's all traced back to those Heritage Minute commercials. Watch it right here: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=pUOG2g4hj8s>

This is so pervasive that the first time I was in Montreal, I actually took a picture of the road sign where his practice was located – the street having been renamed in his honour.

Chris Korvela

By email

Doctor Who and FT

Regarding *FT* showing up in *Doctor Who* [FT389:2]: no need to fret about it being The Master with the complete *FT* collection. At the point where that happens, he has not yet revealed his true identity, but is playing a role – as he often does in his elaborate and sometimes very lengthy schemes. He is still presenting himself as a former employee of, and then collaborator with, the British Secret Service(s), who has previously met the Doctor in a previous (doctoral) male regeneration – and both Doctor and viewer are still led to believe he is one of the Good Guys. So if, while in character, he enthuses about *FT*, it can only be because he assumes the Doctor herself



would approve – his facade isn't exposed until the end of that episode. Whether or not The Master/Missie him/herself likes *FT* is not stated and isn't really relevant. So, *FT* readers have no reason to suspect that they share tastes with the forces of evil. Phew. Now, where did I leave my tissue compressor? .

Owen Whiteoak,
London

Buried golfballs

I was mildly amused to find a golfball half-buried in my front garden (picture above) just a few days after reading about this in *Sidelines* [FT385:12]. I have previously found similar plantings in flowerbeds and flowerpots, but – unlike the family in Suffolk – assumed that this was a common squirrel habit, and didn't think to contact a newspaper. I also do not live next to a golf course, but imagine that somewhere in our vicinity is a golf player who keeps a diminishing stash of balls in his shed. What really tickled me about the Sideline was the statement that "it must be squirrels mistaking them for eggs." Round here, the tree rodents mostly bury conkers and hazelnuts; but perhaps things are different in Suffolk.

Kirsten Baron
Reigate, Surrey

Lactic acid

Every 10 years or so I'm roused from my stupor to write to your letters page. As a consultant of 14 years and lead clinician in critical care at the Freeman Hospital, I feel duty-bound to comment on Mythconceptions

245: Lactic acid [FT389:23]. Lactic acid was first found in sour milk by the Swedish biochemist Carl Wilhelm Scheele in 1780, hence the name, acid from lactose. Lactic acid does not actually occur in the body, certainly not for very long. The lactic acid myth described in Mythconceptions

has its origins in the way the two simple organic molecules, lactic acid and sodium lactate, were confused with each other in the early days of cellular biology.

Critical care is pretty much the management of physiological shock. Shock is where the body fails to provide adequately for its own metabolic needs, essentially failing to get oxygen to where it's needed. At a basic level, getting oxygen where it's needed requires three simple things to be optimised: oxygen uptake in the lungs, oxygen carriage by haemoglobin in the blood and cardiac output to pump it around the body. More simply: you need lungs, blood and a heart. When any or all of these fail, cells are forced to run up an oxygen debt. This is where energy is created without the use of oxygen via a process known as anaerobic respiration or more specifically, the glycolytic pathway. Without this backup, cells would die the moment the oxygen supply ran out. We would never be able to run 100 metres, put on a tourniquet or have a seizure without dying rapidly. It's a bit like an energy overdraft; you have to pay it back fairly soon or you get into trouble, but it's useful when you don't have the readies (or any easily available oxygen).

When no oxygen is present, anaerobic respiration produces hydrogen ions (or acidity) and as pyruvate, the resultant breakdown product of glucose has nowhere to go and is converted into lactate. Lactate is then sent off to the liver to be converted back to glucose, a helpful process known as the Cori cycle. This carries on inefficiently producing energy until the cell dies of excess acid-

ity or oxygen appears on the scene. The lactic acid myth is essentially the triumph of assumed causation over observed correlation. Lactate itself is not acidic but it appears to rise in cells at the same rate as the acid level in the cell rises. There is a correlation, but one does not directly cause the other. What many people call lactic acidosis should therefore more correctly be called hyperlactatataemic acidosis. I certainly couldn't blame the average cycling coach for not knowing this.

To understand why many people (including many doctors) still believe the myth, we need to look at how this correlation was first observed. The glycolytic pathway was first described by Meyerhoff and Hill, winning for them the joint Nobel prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1922. Hill specifically coined the term oxygen debt after observing the changes in muscles with extreme exercise. He found that not only did the expected oxygen requirements exceed the delivery during *Chariots of Fire*-style PE, but that the measured levels of 'lactic acid' in muscles and plasma increased in proportion to the physicality of the running, hopping, skipping, jumping, etc he forced his subject to engage in. He also noted that the pH of the cells became more acidic. This state of affairs, he correctly assumed, was produced by anaerobic respiration. He published widely on the subject and lived a long and interesting scientific life. Unfortunately, the test Hill had used for identifying lactic acid had identified lactate. As I stated earlier, there is no lactic acid in the body; there is lactate and there is acid.

By the time biochemists had identified the error many years later, the lactic acid myth had become an exercise meme: acid bad, lactic acid bad, acid causes pain, lactic acid in muscles causes pain. It seems so obvious and easily understood. It is, however, all rubbish – but interesting nonetheless.

Dr Jon Walton
Freeman Hospital,
Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

Unquiet Australian houses

Some years ago, we lived in a house built shortly after WWII. From what we were able to gather, at least four families had occupied the house before us. During the time we lived there, my wife Carol and our eldest son Mike would occasionally catch glimpses of a little blonde-haired girl watching them from one of the bedrooms. Sometimes they'd see her out of the corner of the eye; at other times they'd be able to see her clearly for a few seconds before she disappeared. I never saw her, nor did our youngest son Tom. One day when Tom was about five, he freaked me out a little when he asked me what the floating balls of coloured light that followed me around the house were. He said that he saw them behind me all the time and that he thought it was normal for some people to have balls of light following them around like puppies.

We never felt threatened by these things, or by the other odd occurrences that took place in the house; they just seemed to be part of our home. One incident that really stands out involves a little golden crocodile charm that my wife wore on a gold chain. Carol is always checking her jewellery is in place, touching her earrings and other jewellery dozens of times a day. She'd lost a valuable diamond earring years ago and is always worried that some other cherished item will fall off and be lost. One morning as she was getting ready for work, she noticed that the crocodile was missing from the chain around her neck. She knew it had been in place the night before. As I was working an afternoon shift and had hours before I needed to leave home, I told her I would search the house and try and find it. As it was less than 2cm long, I didn't hold out much hope. I completely stripped our bed and checked all the bedclothes. No crocodile. I then remade the bed and moved



on to the other rooms. Nothing. Frustrated, I said out loud: "I know it's somewhere in the house, please help me find it". I went back into our room and there, sitting squarely in the middle of the pillow on my wife's side of the freshly made bed, was the little golden crocodile. It wasn't caught on a thread or fastened to the pillowcase in any way; it was simply lying there as if it'd been presented for display by some unseen hand.

Years later, after we moved out of that house to a very odd and probably haunted house in rural Victoria, we were contacted by a former neighbour who wanted to know if anything weird had happened at our old home. He told us he'd found a very pale-looking builder who'd been doing some renovations in our old house, standing in the street telling whoever would listen: "No way am I going back in that place, it's haunted". This after a heavy torch had been taken twice out of his workbag and turned on. The second time it had been left pointing at the roof halfway down a flight of stairs. He was alone in the house; the new owners were living elsewhere during the renovations.

My son Mike had married and had a family of his own. They also moved into an old rural farmhouse in central Victoria, and would be woken at night

by bangs and clatters from the kitchen. He said it sounded like someone knocking on the walls and banging pans together, not overly loud, but enough to be annoying and keep everyone awake. After several nights of this, he went into the kitchen area and said: "We all have to stay in this house, we'll look after the place. But could you please stop the noise? We all need some sleep". The noises stopped.

Mike tells me that whatever they are still sharing the house with makes its presence known by moving things about. A light fitting that hangs down from their living room ceiling will often start swinging in a wide arcing circle while the family watches TV. And no, there isn't a breeze, he's checked with a candle flame. Whatever it is, it doesn't seem to mean them any harm – it appears to just want to remind them it's still there keeping them company.

Geejay Ess
North Central Victoria, Australia

Scratch my back

Re psychological priming by ghost hunters (Mackenzie tomb in Greyfriars cemetery, Edinburgh, **FT388:21**): I was a curious sceptic when I did the Edinburgh ghost tour on 30 December 2018 that ended

with the Mackenzie tomb. The tour around Greyfriars was good, especially the stories about 'bloody Mackenzie' and the imprisonment of the Covenanters. We were taken to one of the empty, open-air vaults located behind the locked gates and told about several instances of reported poltergeist activity, along with examples of what has previously happened. There were the usual psychological 'tricks' to get people nervous (such as suggesting a time limit, which was naturally due to expire, before activity was due to start, a masked member of the tour jumping out) – but none of this really had an effect on me. After meeting back up with my wife, who was too scared to join the final part, I couldn't help feeling a little sceptical; I dismissed the whole thing as just a marketing ploy for tourists.

The next day, I decided to go back to Greyfriars to have a look around in daylight. I didn't hang around for long, as it was pretty busy. As I walked down the road, I must have got around 100ft (30m) when I felt a burning sensation on my neck. As I carried on walking, it felt more pronounced; a burning sensation like a cat scratch. When I got to a café, I went to the bathroom and saw a 2in (5cm) scratch along my neck. An hour and a half later, we were back at the flat we were staying in when my wife gasped as I was getting changed. My whole back was covered in scratches. I did take photos at the time, but they were lost after I got a new phone. If this story was taken as a testimonial to the Mackenzie poltergeist, then most people would perhaps dismiss it as made up, or put it down to the power of suggestion. My own perspective is that although the Mackenzie 'story' needs a stronger and more consistent narrative, it was certainly strange for a curmudgeonly sceptic to get all those scratches in broad daylight amongst the throng of a city.

Alex Whyles
Manchester

Fortean Traveller



120. Sutton Hoo

MATT SALSBURY digs up the strange stories surrounding the discoveries made at one of Britain's most famous archaeological sites

High on the slopes of the River Deben, near the Suffolk town of Woodbridge, lies Sutton Hoo, an estate with woods and a house with spectacular estuary views. On this property lies a cluster of mounds, from which one of England's greatest archaeological discoveries emerged. Here, on the eve of World War II, was uncovered the spectacular ship burial of an Anglo-Saxon believed to be King Rædwald of the East Angles, who reigned from AD 599 to his death around AD 624.

The original Sutton Hoo treasures – including a stunning decorated helmet, as well as gold jewellery inlaid with garnets from India and Sri Lanka – are now on display in the less atmospheric

surroundings of Room 41 of the British Museum in London. But you can see replicas at Sutton Hoo and take woodland walks to visit the impressive Royal Burial Mounds and the house once owned by Edith Pretty, who called in the archaeologists back in 1939.

The Sutton Hoo estate, including the Royal Burial Mounds, the exhibition hall and the house (now known as Tranmer House), are today owned by the National Trust, who reopened the estate to the public in 2019 after a £4 million "transformation" – a refitted exhibition space and new footpaths including a River View Walk through the woods, retracing the route along which the ship was dragged from the river for burial. By the time you read this, a viewing tower will

probably have opened, allowing visitors a bird's eye view of the Royal Burial Mounds.

My visit was in weather reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry – during a gale, in August! Sutton Hoo's Property Operations Manager Alison Girling bade me take a seat in one of Sutton Hoo's many cafés while she got me a coffee, but it never arrived. After a long wait I caught sight of her through the café window, jogging as she talked urgently into a radio – she was shutting down the site as the gale took hold. It wasn't safe that day for walkers to go into the woods, I was told, as branches from the tall pines would likely fall on them.

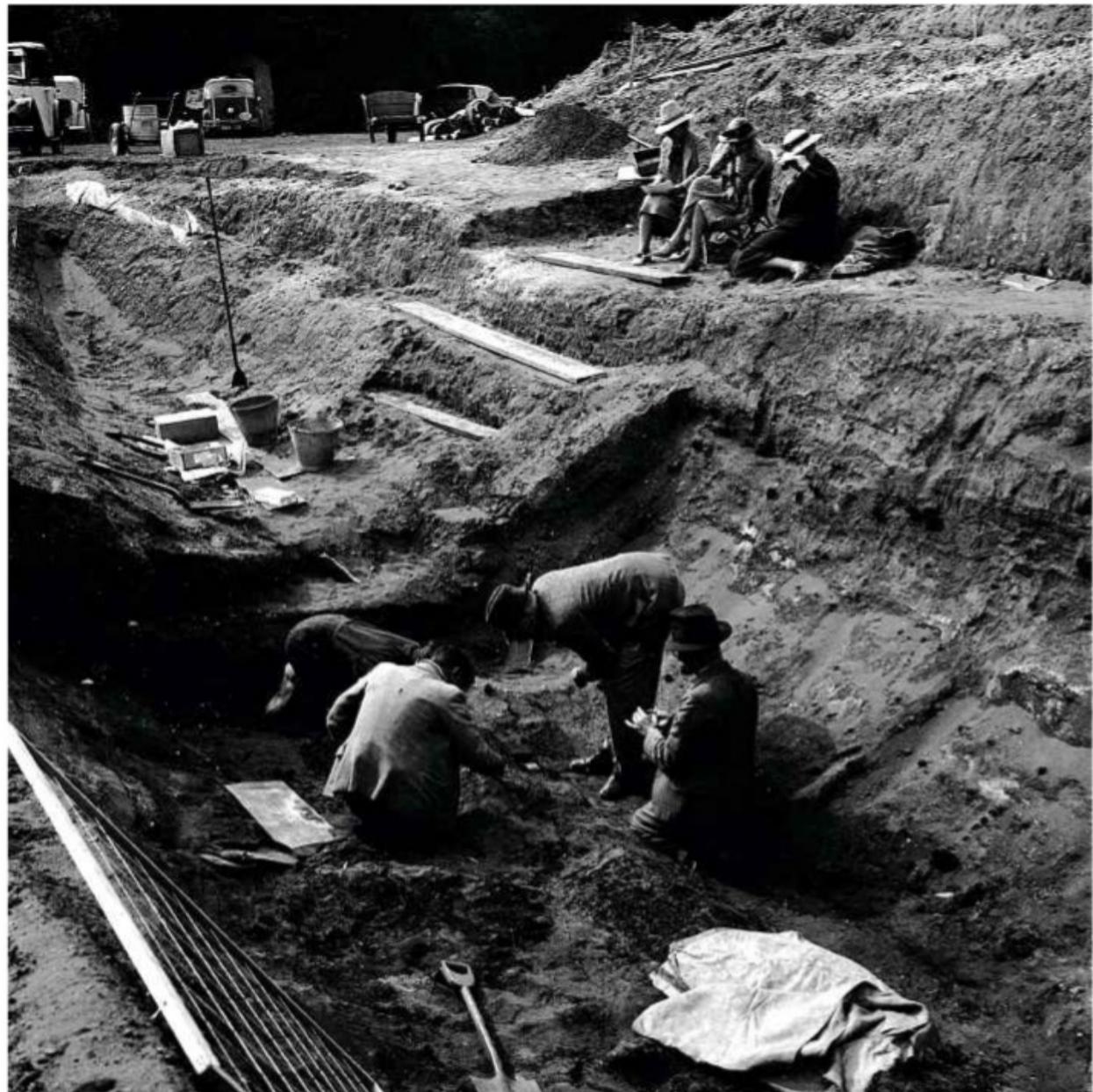
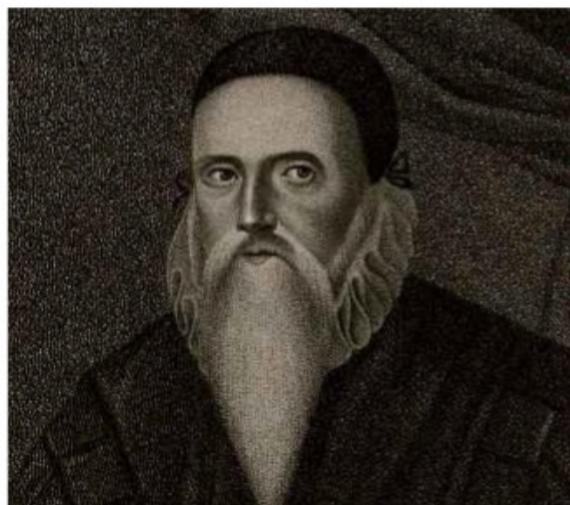
The story of how the treasures of Sutton Hoo came to be uncovered includes some fortean twists. Numerous

slightly different accounts of what inspired Edith Pretty to call in freelance self-taught archaeologist and astronomer Basil Brown feature séances, spectral apparitions of warriors on horseback and a local "metal diviner". It's as if the gold and silver treasures lying beneath Sutton Hoo's mounds were exerting a supernatural influence on their discoverers – as if the treasures were crying out to mortals to find them.

But the legitimate excavations in what's now known as Mound 1, the world's greatest Anglo-Saxon ship burial, complete with the impression on the sandy soil of the timbers of a buried ship 90ft (24.7m) long, weren't the first. Tudor grave robbers had looted most of the other mounds long before the official dig – "ill-doers" had dug a "robber's trench" into Mound 1 that came within inches of discovering the treasures of King Rædwald. Who were these Tudor grave robbers? Tradition has pointed the finger of suspicion at Elizabeth I's astrologer and



ABOVE: Sunset over the Royal Burial Mounds at Sutton Hoo.



TOP LEFT: Archaeologist Basil Brown. ABOVE LEFT: Was Dr John Dee the 16th-century looter of the burial mounds? ABOVE RIGHT: Edith Pretty (in cane chair) at a 1939 dig.

legendary occultist Dr John Dee (1527-1608).

At the time of the 1939 excavation, Basil Brown's team came across Mound 1's robber's trench and found Mound 2 extensively looted. Brown's team believed that this happened in the 16th century and there is still a commonly held belief today that it was the work of a team led by Dee. The robber's trench was later firmly dated by the discovery in it of a Bellarmine jar (famous for its use as a "witch bottle"; see FT359:32-37). A tradition also seems to have taken hold that Dr Dee sought a commission to search for treasure on the East Coast. (Sutton Hoo is just 12 miles/19km from the sea.)

Dee believed he possessed the ability to discover hidden treasure, and had several misadventures in that field. He genuinely had some expertise in geology, surveying and metal assaying; in later life he leased and ran mines of his own in Devonshire, from which he received royalties. Dee's writings made little distinction between mining for ores and digging for treasure in a period when archaeology was known as 'gold mining'.

Tradition points the finger of suspicion at Dr John Dee

Dee's scryer (spirit medium) Edward Kelley conned him with an elaborate hoax involving fake artefacts he claimed to have dug up at Blockley, Gloucestershire, in 1583 (or from Glastonbury or from a Welsh bishop's tomb, in other versions). These were a book allegedly written by St Dunstan, a vial of a red "powder of projection" and a scroll in coded mediæval Latin written by two exiled Danish princes. The latter included a map cryptically describing 10 locations of other buried treasure. Dee was convinced this was all for real.

One of the numerous spirits that Kelley persuaded Dee had appeared to him instructed the two men to dig up the treasure identified in the scroll. The spirit identified himself as "El", opening up his chest to reveal his name written on his heart.

El allegedly told them that if they collected soil samples from each location mentioned in Kelley's scroll, spirits could then recover whatever lay buried there. Dee found the money to send Kelley on a 12-day voyage around England in 1583 to gather these "earths".

According to contemporary belief, treasure buried in the earth was in the custody of demons, only discoverable with their help. The 1562 Statute against Sorcery carried the death penalty for persistent discovery of treasure "by the aid of magic". Dee repudiated magic and believed he was using mathematics and the scientific exercise of supernatural powers to find buried treasure. He therefore sought Royal Letters Patent to protect him against accusations of sorcery in his endeavours.

Prompted by his desperate finances, Dee wrote in October 1574 to Lord Treasurer William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Pleading for an annual pension of at least £200, Dee proposed a way to source it cost-free, by discovering buried treasure. He saw the appearance of a new star two years previously as foretelling "the finding of

some treasure". Dee's letter explained how visions, dreams and "strange terrestrial emanations" pointed to hoards hidden beneath the earth. Dee's letter requested a licence to seek for treasure on the Queen's behalf, in return for half the spoils. Cecil declined. Martin Carver (see bibliography below) suggests that Dee's proposal to Lord Burghley could have been an attempt at "a portable antiquities scam", presumably aimed at fleecing investors.

Enthralling as the idea of Dr Dee grave robbing Sutton Hoo is, it's supported by scant evidence. The cryptic "Danish scroll" apparently made no references to locations around Sutton Hoo. Carver describes a "systematic pillaging of mounds in Suffolk" starting from the time of the dissolution of the monasteries (some 20 years before Dee's letter to Cecil), fuelled by a belief that corrupt monks had buried their ill-gotten gains. Landowners could apply for licences to dig for treasure on their own land; Sutton Hoo's local landowners in Dee's time were the Mather family, Sir Michael Stanhope and Sir Henry Wood, so suspicion falls on them



ABOVE LEFT: A craftsman-made replica of the Sutton Hoo helmet. ABOVE RIGHT: The Warrior Horseman's burial treasures on display at Sutton Hoo.

rather than Dee. In the lean, famine-afflicted 1570s, many in desperation turned to digging for buried treasure, especially in burial mounds – so much so that “hill-digger” became a term of abuse. So the intriguing idea of Dr Dee as a clandestine Sutton Hoo archaeologist begins to look less likely.

Some 350 years after Dee’s alleged occult diggings in the vicinity, the mix of paranormal phenomena and archaeology returned to Sutton Hoo.

Edith Pretty, who lived in the house at Sutton Hoo, was involved in Spiritualism and donated money to the Spiritualist church in Woodbridge. When her husband Frank was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1934, she contacted well-known Spiritualist faith healer William Parish, of whom she was reportedly so in awe that she later instructed her gardeners to plant tulip bulbs in the spots where Parish had paused while walking around the estate. Edith had already been England’s first woman magistrate, volunteered as a nurse in France in World War I, travelled to Egypt, Sudan and South America and gone on a tour of Europe by car. With her husband gone, such an adventurous woman needed something to occupy her mind: her thoughts turned to archaeology and the spirit world.

There is some debate as to whether séances were held at Sutton Hoo. One account by a local source told of them being conducted in a purple-draped “telephone room”. It is known

“Go on digging and you’ll find what you’re looking for”

that a “tiny room” in the house was used as a private chapel where Edith could “talk to my husband” after his death. Maids described a crucifix and candles there. Archaeologist Charles Phillips in his memoirs records that Edith would go to Spiritualist meetings in Woodbridge every Thursday, where she would “commune” with her husband through a medium. Other sources say she regularly attended séances in London, or that she was with the Spiritualist church in London Road, Ipswich, which survives today as the Horley Spiritualist Centre. She also came into contact with medium and spirit healer Albert Charles Toft of Llanelli, who claimed to be directed by a disembodied Indian spirit diagnostician named Ranji.

One story of how Edith was inspired to commission the Sutton Hoo dig was simply that it came to her in a dream. Edith told Basil Brown when he was on the 1939 dig to go to a Spiritualist service in Woodbridge, where medium Florence Thompson was in attendance. According to Brown’s diary, Florence told him: “I see fields... Now I see

lots of sand... all sand... assert yourself... go on digging... and you will find what you’re looking for.”

Another story – recounted by Sheila Norman, daughter of the leader of the Woodbridge Spiritualist congregation – has a séance conducted, or at least attended by, Pretty, supposedly in London, in which a man on a black horse materialised and told her to plunge a sword into the mounds.

In yet another version, an unnamed guest at Sutton Hoo saw “warriors atop the mounds” one morning from an upstairs window; another variation had these as spectral “horsemen”. Yet another iteration of the story has a friend staying with Edith reporting a single “ghostly figure on horseback on the mounds”; it’s not clear whether this was the same friend who saw multiple figures, on horseback or otherwise, from the upstairs window.

There was a pair of buzzards flying over the Deben when I went on the guided walk of the Royal Burial Mounds led by Mark Brewster, my guide from the Sutton Hoo Society. He related what he described as a “ghost story” in which – during a séance in the long “séance room” on the top floor of the Sutton Hoo house – a guest rushed to the window after seeing from the corner of her eye a single figure on horseback and holding a sword ride over a mound. Brewster reckons it was probably just a poacher, heading down to the Deben ferry. East Anglia’s sudden thick mists can

play tricks with the eyes.

A more prosaic explanation for Edith’s motivation to seek a dig on her land is that her father had been an amateur archaeologist. There was also a tenant living on the Sutton Hoo estate known as “Old Pettit” who was said to be a metal diver. He assured Edith that “fabulous treasure” lay under her garden – gold and silver – especially in the larger mound.

If you stand outside Tranmer House today and look up, you can see the upstairs windows from which Edith’s guest allegedly saw at least one spectral horseman on the mounds. Now only the ground floor is open to the public, the top floor bedrooms having become holiday apartments. While the other mounds aren’t visible from the ground floor, you can see the top of Mound 2 through the windows. Mound 2 – the one looted by Tudor grave-robbers and possibly something to do with Dr Dee – was built up with earth in the 1980s, partly so visitors could see something of the mounds from the house, but also in an attempt to reconstruct how the mounds might have looked before a millennium and a half of ploughing and erosion reduced them.

There was a faint smell of woodsmoke when I visited Tranmer House. One room has become a wood-panelled cinema, with film and radio recordings of the 1939 dig playing. The National Trust have made a good job of evoking 1939 – among the facsimile documents on the desk that visitors can handle



ABOVE LEFT: Edith Pretty. ABOVE RIGHT: Tranmer House was bought by Edith in 1926. Was it a ghostly vision seen from a window that led to the excavation of the mounds?

is a telegram sent by Brown to archaeologist couple the Piggotts. Peggy Piggott was a much more experienced archaeologist than her husband, but in 1930s Cambridge women couldn't take full degrees, only "diplomas", so she was the less qualified junior partner of the couple. The telegram tells her husband Stuart they've found a "VIKING SHIP" (what they first thought they'd found) and instructed him to "BRING WIFE".

As the Sutton Hoo dig team were sorting through their finds, a planned open day to showcase some of these was cancelled as World War II broke out. Work on the dig stopped, and the "ship trench" was hastily covered over with bracken. In Tranmer House's drawing room you will hear Neville Chamberlain's tones on the radiogram saying he had "received no such assurances... so I have to tell you that from midnight tonight, we are at war with Germany".

Edith donated the finds to the British Museum – faith healer William Parish was apparently influential in her decision. Only when her executors were clearing up after Edith's death did they discover the letter from Winston Churchill offering her a CBE for her generous gesture. Edith had declined. The finds were shipped to the British Museum's underground safe storage facility in Aldwych Underground station for the duration of the war.

At wartime Sutton Hoo, the mounds were filled back in, only to be damaged by armoured vehicles driving over them, destroying much of the

impression in earth left by the huge ship in which King Rædwald had been interred. The anti-glider trenches dug across the estate (well clear of the mounds) to stop German paratroopers landing are still visible. Edith Pretty died suddenly in 1942; her house became a hostel for Land Army girls (some carved their names on the fireplace) and smaller buildings on the estate became a refugees' school.

The archaeologists were back at Sutton Hoo in 1985, in a series of digs that yielded the remains of a noblewoman cremated in two bowls, and also the remains of a dog, horse, goat and sheep.

Unearthed in Mound 17 were the bones of a young warrior buried together with his horse in full ornate harness, the horse apparently sacrificed to accompany his master to the afterlife. (You can see them in the exhibition hall, together with a replica Saxon sword that you can try lifting – it's surprisingly heavy!) These burial practices hinted at a culture in transition from paganism to Christianity – King Rædwald converted to Christianity himself and raised Christian altars, but on the advice of the women of his household kept those dedicated to the pagan gods in place as well.

Were the apparitions on horseback seen by Edith's guests something to do with the warrior horseman buried in Mound 17? England's man-and-horse burials are almost exclusively from Suffolk – others were discovered at Eye, Mildenhall and Snape. There's also a legend in the Suffolk village of Blythburgh

– 22 miles (35km) up the coast – about a ghostly horse that used to burst forth from a mound to canter around the local common. (The mound has long since been lost to erosion and ploughing.) Could Blythburgh's equestrian phantom have been inspired by a long-forgotten Saxon horse burial find?

Other excavations, including the digs in the 1980s and 1990s, unearthed mysterious "sandmen" – blackened stick men with vague features, which melted away to nothing soon after being exhumed. These, it turns out, were the victims of mediæval executions, dumped in the earth. Coastal Suffolk's sandy, acid soil meant the bodies quickly rotted away, the spaces in the earth then being filled with black, sandy silt. These mystery figures, basically made of sand, fell apart on contact with air. Like the impressions of the victims of Pompeii, there's one black-painted fibreglass cast of a "sandman" on the Sutton Hoo site. Brewster said he thinks the other sandman casts are somewhere in British Museum storage.

These days, the archaeology is happening four miles down the road at Rendlesham (better known as the epicentre of the UK's best-known UFO incident) where a team of detectorists, with the permission of the landowner, are sweeping the fields where the seat of the Kings of East Anglia once lay. Brewster told me he's heard Sutton Hoo has more – as yet undisturbed – mounds somewhere among the trees near the river.



NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JOHN MILLAR

FURTHER READING

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John Preston, *The Dig*, Penguin, 2008. In September 2019, a Netflix crew were spotted in Suffolk filming a forthcoming TV series based on this novel about the 1939 excavations and starring Ralph Fiennes and Carey Mulligan.

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Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr John Dee, Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I*, Henry Holt, 2002.

Francis Young, "Edward Kelley's Danish treasure hoax and Elizabethan antiquarianism", *Intellectual History Review*, February 2019, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17496977.2019.1643182.

GM Hort, "Dr John Dee", *Three Famous Occultists*, Rider & Co, 1922.

National Trust Sutton Hoo, admission £13.50 adults, for seasonal opening times www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo

• MATT SALSBURY is a regular FT contributor (and for many years 'our man in Suffolk') and freelance journalist. He is working on a book about Suffolk mystery animals.

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past presents a WWI double act featuring animal mimicry, contortionism and lion-taming...



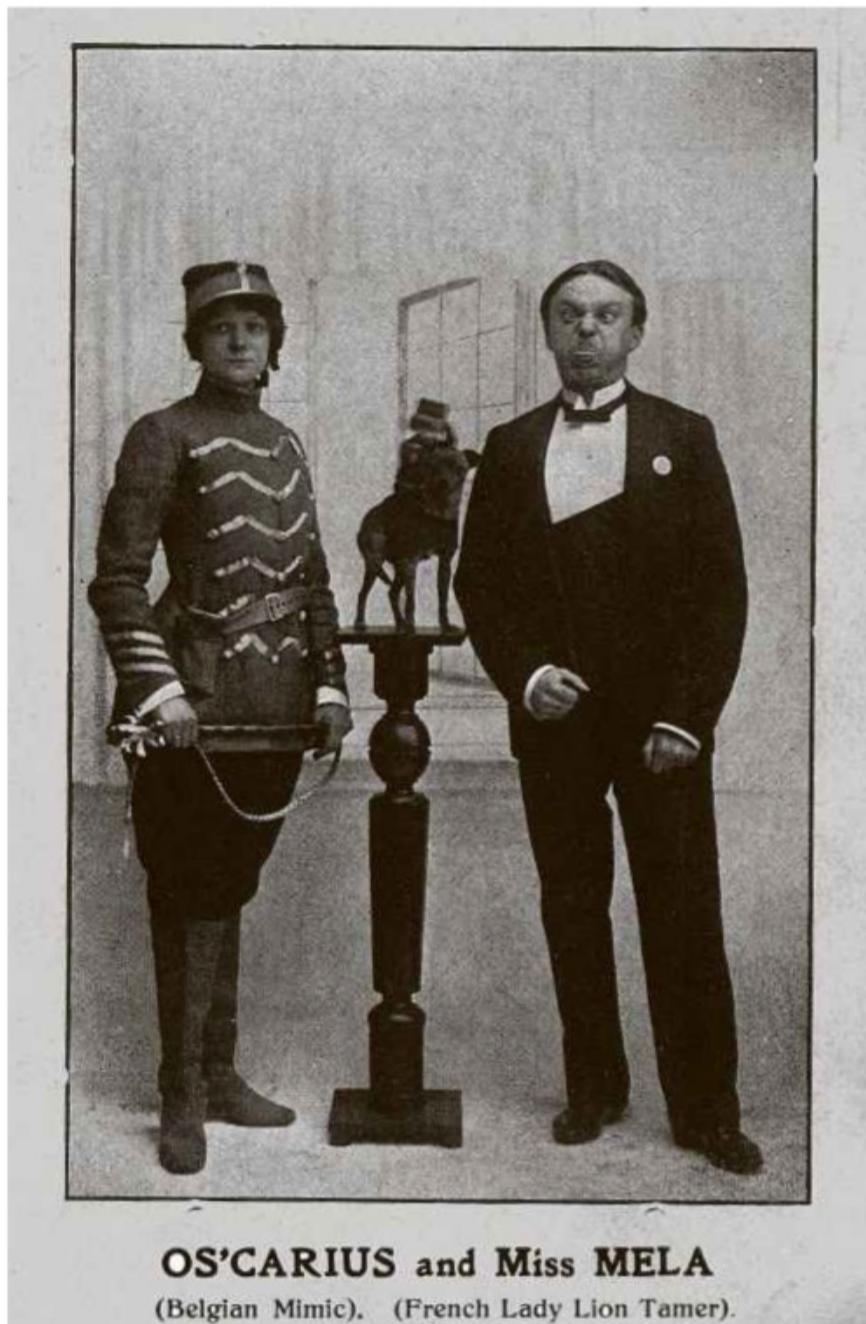
2. OS'CARIUS AND MISS MELA

Having a picture postcard printed for the purpose of advertisement was cheap in Edwardian times, and within the grasp of even the most humble stage performers; the surviving cards provide well-nigh unique illustrations of some long-forgotten music hall acts.

This month's postcard features Os'carius, the Belgian mimic, who looks rather as if he is blowing a raspberry. His partner Miss Mela, the French Lady Lion Tamer, is appropriately attired in a circus uniform, and carries a whip, but on the pedestal next to her is no lion, just a small dog, possibly stuffed, and with what looks like a dummy strapped to its back.

Os'carius was a small-time Belgian mimic and imitator, who came to Britain as a refugee in December 1914 to make a perilous living performing in the provincial music halls. He teamed up with the Frenchwoman Miss Mela, who was a singer and comedienne. It cannot be deduced why these two had left their respective countries of birth, or why they were performing in wartime Britain, where foreigners were held in scant regard.

Their earliest recorded performance was in May 1915, at the Aylesbury Market Theatre in Buckinghamshire. Later that month they appeared at the Workmen's Hall, Tonypandy, South Wales, where Miss Mela was billed as "the favourite soprano vocalist of the Scala Theatre, Brussels" and the pair presented a "playlet dealing with the present war crisis entitled *An Anglo-French Soldier's Dream*".



OS'CARIUS and Miss MELA

(Belgian Mimic). (French Lady Lion Tamer).

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LEFT: A postcard showing Os'carius and Mlle Mela. BELOW: An advertisement shows that these "Real Franco-Belgians" were the chief draw at the Empire Theatre in Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire, Wales, in September 1915.

Later in 1915, Os'carius and Miss Mela were performing at the Victoria Hall in Hirwaun, South Wales, where the programme summarised their act: "Oscarius and Miss Mela, mimics, contortionists, imitators of birds, animals and musical instruments, with a lion tamer's comedy parody, plus a filmed display of King Albert of the Belgians in the trenches." In September 1916, Os'carius was in Bristol, where he "astonished the audience with his facial mimicry, and impersonations of various animals." He gave a free performance before the wounded soldiers at the 2nd Southern General Hospital. In October the same year, Os'carius and Miss Mela had moved on to The Hall in Derry, where they were introduced as "The Celebrated Belgian Mimics, in a Laughable Potpourri Act, as given before H.R.H. Princess Louise and Royal Party."

In March 1918, the *Western Daily Press* could announce "Os'carius and Mela, Belgian Potpourri" at the Empire, Old Market Street, Bristol. "Os'carius (famous Belgian artist) and Miss Mela (favourite soprano vocalist)" were at the Palladium, Lichfield, in April 1918.

The last we hear of these two obscure foreign performers is that later in April 1918 they performed at the Olympia in Cardiff.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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PHENOMENOMIX

Legends of
Sir Francis Drake

HUNT EMERSON

MOST PEOPLE KNOW OF FRANCIS DRAKE CALMLY PLAYING BOWLS WHILE THE SPANISH ARMADA SAILED TO INVADE ENGLAND!



ANOTHER DEVON STORY SAYS THAT, WHEN HE DID ENGAGE WITH THE ENEMY, DRAKE THREW WOOD CHIPS INTO PLYMOUTH SOUND...

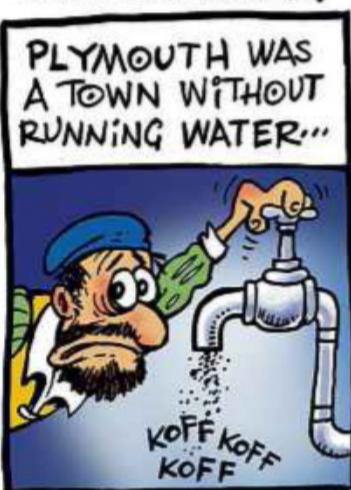


...THEY INSTANTLY BECAME FIRESHIPS, TO HARRY THE SPANISH FLEET!



HERE'S A COUPLE MORE DEVON LEGENDS ABOUT BOLD SIR FRANCIS!

PLYMOUTH WAS A TOWN WITHOUT RUNNING WATER...



DRAKE RODE UP INTO DARTMOOR, WHERE HE ISSUED ORDERS TO A FRESH WATER SPRING...



THIS WAY, STREAM! FOLLOW ME!



AND SO PLYMOUTH HAD THE BOON OF RUNNING WATER!



DRAKE'S SEA VOYAGES WERE LONG AND FAR! AT ONE TIME, HE WAS GONE SO LONG THAT EVERYONE DECIDED HE MUST BE DEAD - INCLUDING, EVENTUALLY, HIS WIFE...

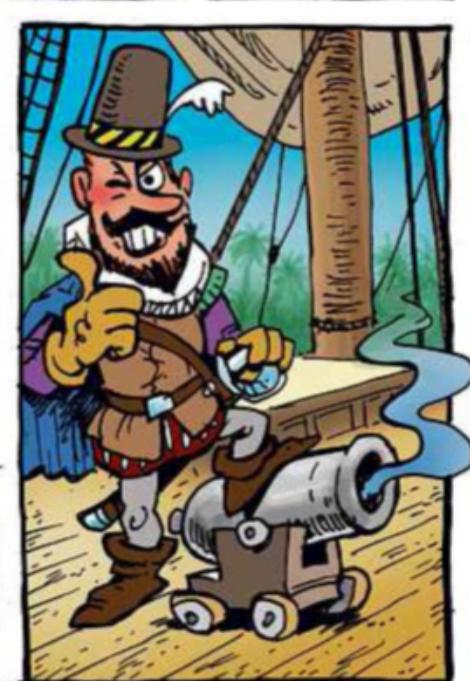
'E'S SAILED HIS TOO FAR THIS TIME! "NEW WORLD" HAS EATEN HIM!



HER MIND WAS FURTHER DECIDED WHEN A NEW SUITOR ADDED HIS PERSUASIONS...



THEY WERE AT THE ALTAR, WHEN...



COMING NEXT MONTH



THE LONDON MONSTER

AN 18TH-CENTURY PHANTOM
ATTACKER ON THE LOOSE



VINYL RECKONING

SPOOKY STORIES FROM
HAUNTED RECORD SHOPS



COCKROACH FARMS,
TRICKSTER SPIRITS,
EXORCISING NESSIE
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 391

ON SALE 26 MAR 2020

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

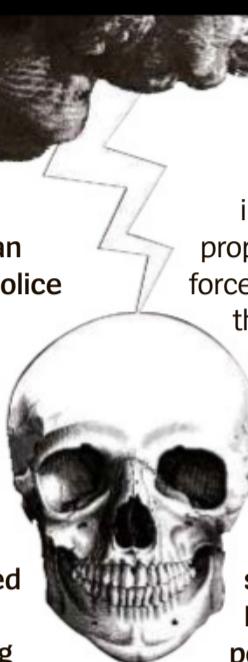
An American man who booby-trapped his own home as protection against intruders was killed by his own device. 65-year-old Ronald Cyr of Van Buren, Maine, made a 911 call to police explaining that he had been shot. Officers attending the scene found a door designed to fire a handgun should anyone attempt to enter. Cyr was taken to hospital but died of his injuries. Police in Van Buren, bordering the Canadian province New Brunswick, said they responded to the 911 call in the early evening of 28 November 2019 (Thanksgiving Day) and found other suspect devices in Cyr's home, causing them to call in Maine State's Police Bomb Squad. "Following an extensive investigation that lasted into the early morning," a police statement read: "It was determined that Mr Cyr had been shot as the result of the unintentional discharge of one of his homemade devices. Regrettably, Mr Cyr succumbed to the injuries he sustained from the gunshot". It is not known how he had managed to accidentally trigger the weapon. abcnews.go.com, BBC News, 1 Dec 2019.

Such home-defence traps are not uncommon, but they are illegal, since the law adjudges life to be more valuable than property, and that such devices are unable to distinguish between their targets or prevent accidental injury. Even if a criminal intruder is the victim, the law states that homeowners have no right to determine their punishment.

Other cases of booby-trapped homes in the US are not unknown. In February 2019, a team of real estate investors walking through a home they had bought in Philadelphia discovered a staircase rigged with string – which, if tripped, would have triggered a swinging knife. In September 2018, an Illinois man was killed when he opened his neighbour William Wasmund's shed, which was rigged to fire a shotgun. Wasmund, 48, was found guilty of first-degree murder and aggravated battery. And in October 2018 an Oregon man was charged after fortifying his home "like a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*" according to FBI agents, who found a circular hot tub linked up to a tripwire, a fortified front door, animal traps and a wheelchair rigged with a shotgun that discharged and hit an agent in the leg.

Booby-trap Injuries can lead to lawsuits. The 1971 Katko vs Briney case in Iowa

saw two homeowners held liable for injuries caused by their spring-loaded shotgun to a trespasser intent on stealing from a vacant property. The court ruled the deadly force was not reasonable and awarded the plaintiff \$30,000 (£23,000) in damages. BBC News, 1 Dec 2019.



A former soldier turned pest controller died after being stung by wasps. Lee Darker, 48, of Darlington, County Durham, served 22 years in the Royal Lancers, during which he was posted to several combat zones, before leaving the army in 2010. He started working for Mitie Pest Control in 2017. After attending to a wasps' nest at the home of an army sergeant based at Catterick Garrison, Mr Darker was stung twice, but felt no immediate ill-effects. He was found slumped in the passenger seat of his van, unresponsive, and was later determined to have died from anaphylactic shock. D.Mail. Metro, 12 Mar 2019.

A Canadian lobster fisherman who had saved numerous whales after they had become entangled in fishing lines and nets was killed when a North American right whale struck him moments after being released off Campobello Island, New Brunswick. Joe Howlett, 59, was a founder of the Campobello Whale Rescue Group and had rescued around 25 whales over 15 years. One of only 850 people upon the island, Howlett was a well-known and well-respected character. Mackie Green, a friend of Howlett and co-founder of the group, said: They got the whale totally disentangled and then some kind of freak thing happened and the whale made a big flip. Joe definitely would not want us to stop because of this. This is something he loved and there's no better feeling than getting a whale untangled". North American right whales are endangered, with only around 500 remaining. At the time of his death, Howlett was on board an official government vessel and had rescued a whale only days before his death. Queensland Times, BBC News, 14 July 2017.

Long distance runner Thomas Stanley, 33, from Wichita was killed by lightning close to the finish line of a 50km (30 mile) race. He was less than a quarter of a mile from completing the FlatRock trail race in Kansas when the small storm suddenly rolled in. D.Mirror, 5 Oct 2019.

Cosy Crime Pays For Indy Author

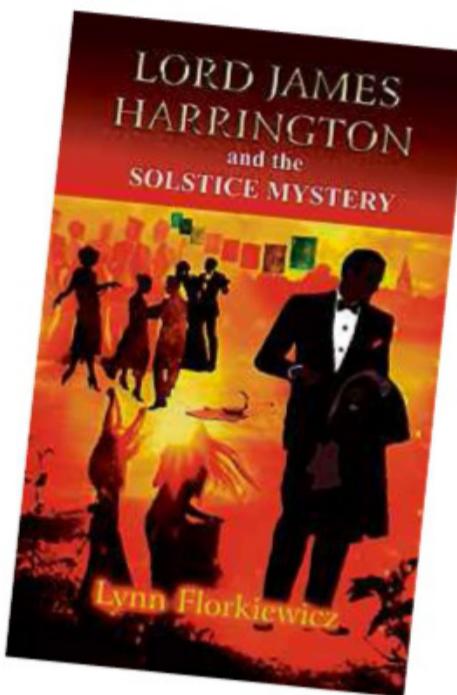
Lynn Florkiewicz's dream of being a writer began when she was just six years old, but it had to sit on the back-burner until, at the age of 45, she took a creative writing course with The Writers Bureau, and started out on a whole new adventure...

Avid reading as a child laid the foundation for Lynn's love of mystery and crime stories, and she always imagined that one day she'd write her own. When she grew up though, marriage and a promising career as a singer/songwriter on the British and American folk circuits gave her little time to pursue writing until, after a bout of particularly debilitating illness, she decided it was time to bring it to the fore.

Lynn enrolled on The Writers Bureau's Creative Writing Course back in 2001. She worked steadily through its 20 tutor-marked assignments, earning her course fees back from published work and getting placed/highly commended in several writing competitions along the way. Confidence thoroughly boosted, she then decided to try writing a children's adventure story - The Quest for the Crystal Skulls, of which, BBC Springwatch's Michaela Strachen said: 'There are many ways to create awareness about what we're doing to planet Earth, I found this an incredibly powerful and compelling one. I read it in one go.' (The Quest for the Crystal Skulls is available from Amazon and Penpress Partnership Book Publishing).

Inspired by a long-time love of cosy crime (Agatha Christie, Carola Dunn etc), Lynn's next move was to follow her

childhood dream and create her own murder-mystery series. And so it was that Lord James Harrington, country landowner, ex-racing driver and amateur sleuth, was born. When her first whodunit, The Winter Mystery, was launched on Kindle it received a plethora of five-star reviews from cosy crime fans, and that was all the encouragement Lynn needed to write more.



Five years on, and Lord James Harrington is a well-established character with his name on nine book covers. Lynn is already in the process of writing a tenth, with plans to release a new mystery every year. The books are all available from Amazon in Kindle, print and audio format, as well



Lynn Florkiewicz

as from Lord Harrington's very own website: www.lordjamesharrington.com.

"I've created a world that I adore and I love to slip into that imaginary community and meet up with my characters," says Lynn. "I am not a literary writer. I'm not here to change the world or make you think, I want to entertain people and, from the feedback I've received, I tick that box."

Recently, Lord James Harrington was picked-up by Magna Publishing (part of Ulverscroft). They intend to release the whole series in audio and large print formats, and already, the American Audio File Magazine has awarded the first of these recordings with an Earphone Audio Award.

Lynn is just one of many Writers Bureau students who have found their way to publishing success. So if you harbour a dream to write, they can help. Their courses provide students with a professional writer as a personal tutor and cover all types of writing, as well as teaching the business side of being an author. To request free details, contact The Writers Bureau at: www.writersbureau.com or call – 0800 856 2008. Quote ATT19

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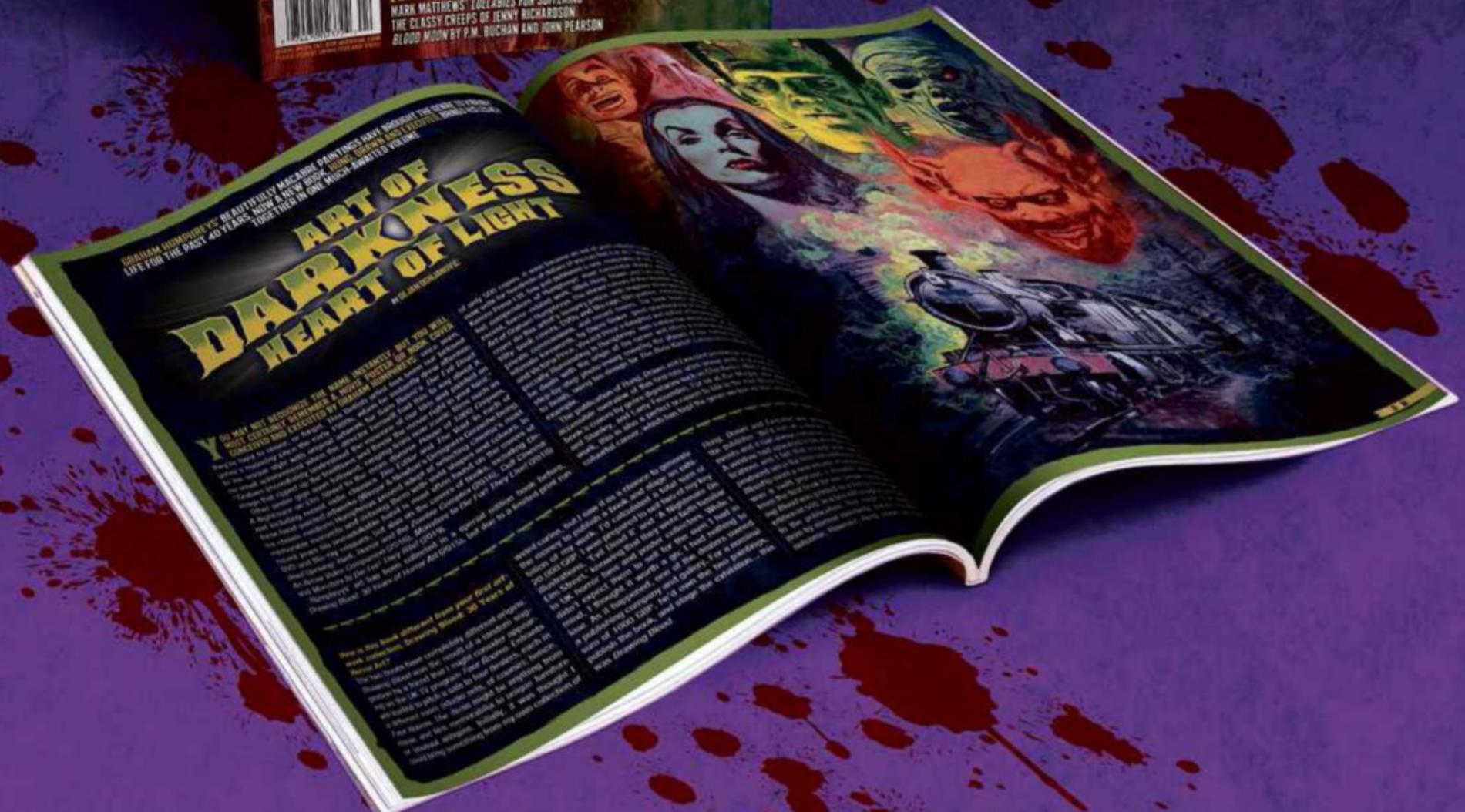
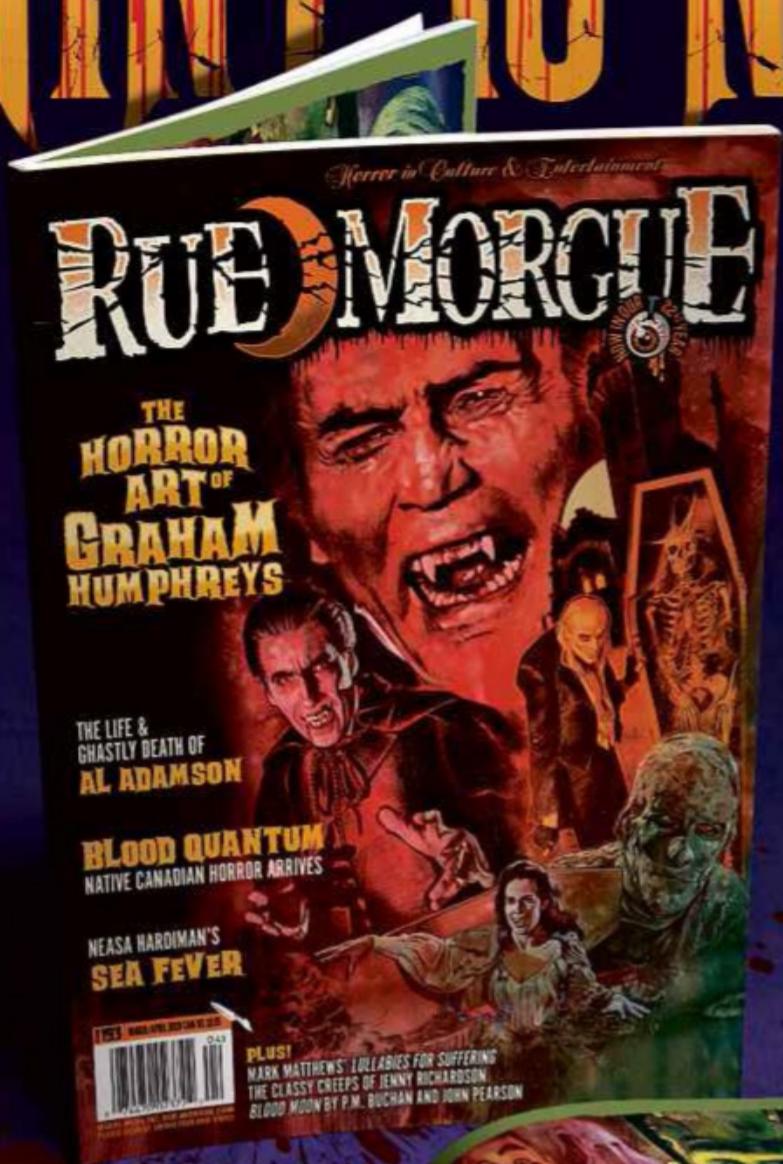
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